

# Wo ist heute das Volk der Herero, wo sind heute seine Häuptlinge? :The German Military Campaign in South West Africa (1904-1907)

*(Wo ist heute das Volk der Herero, wo sind heute seine Häuptlinge? :La campana militar en el  
África del Sudoeste Alemán (1904-1907)*

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## **Abstract**

This research analyses the German army's campaigns against the Herero and Namá peoples between 1904 and 1907. The main hypothesis is that their development was influenced by the international context of the time, as well as by other factors such as European military culture, the emergence of Total War, racism and German military doctrine.

## **Key words**

German Imperialism, Genocide, Total War, Herero, Nama.

## **Resumen**

En esta investigación se analizan las campañas del Ejército alemán contra los pueblos Herero y Namá que se desarrollaron entre 1904 y 1907. La hipótesis principal es que su desarrollo estuvo influido por el contexto internacional del momento, así como por otros factores como la cultura militar europea, la aparición de la Guerra Total, el racismo y la doctrina militar alemana.

### **Palabras clave**

Imperialismo alemán, Genocidio, Guerra Total, Herero, Nama.

### **Introduction**

In the 1960s, two important developments took place in German historiography. The Marxist historian of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Horst Drechsler (1966), published a study on the campaign against the Herero-Nama in which he developed the theory that it was a genocide and tried to link this «criminal» imperialism with the German Federal Republic (GFR) (2966: 158). At the same time, two Marxist historians of the GFR, Fritz Fischer (1967) and Hans-Ulrich Wehler (1985), put forward the theory of the *Deutsche Sonderweg* (German Special Road), according to which the modernisation process in Germany was partial, since the economic transformations were not accompanied by social changes, which resulted in an anti-democratic aristocratic elite provoking two world wars with the sole aim of maintaining its dominant position. According to this approach, there was continuity between Imperial Germany (1871-1918) and Nazi Germany (1933-1945). The military campaign against the Herero and the Nama in German South West Africa between 1904 and 1907 would be an example of this dynamic and a forerunner of the holocaust unleashed during the Second World War (1939-1945). Thus, there was a direct path from Windhoek (capital of German South West Africa) to Auschwitz (Madley, 2005; Steinmetz, 2005; Erichsen and Olusoga, 2010). The continuity theory was also advocated by the American historian Isabel Hull (2005), albeit on the basis of the existence of an extremely violent German military culture, developed during the imperial period, which would be the link between the genocidal dynamics that took place before 1914, during the First World War (Belgium) and after 1918.

However, another group of historians –Helmuth Bley (1998), Birthe Kundruss (2003), Wolfgang Benz (2007), Robert Gerwath and Stephan Malonowski (2007), Jürgen Zimmerer (2011) and Susanne Kuss (2017)– questioned this continuity, insisting that what happened in present-day Namibia and the processes that took place during the Second World War belonged to different historical moments. Matthias Häussler (2021: 14-19), who also rejected the idea of continuity, has developed the theory of colonialism as an open system to explain what happened in German South West Africa.

Nevertheless, beyond this divergence of positions, one aspect that should be emphasised is that these authors consider the internal factors of the German Empire – *Primat der Innenpolitik* (Primacy of Domestic Policy)– to be dominant in their explanations, as opposed to the international situation at the time –*Primat der Aussenpolitik* (Primacy of Foreign Policy)–. On the contrary, I believe that the development of these military campaigns, including their genocidal dynamics, cannot be separated from the external context. Therefore, the hypothesis I defend is that these operations were an episode of Total War, defined by the prevailing racism in European society at the time, whose development and radicalisation was related to the progressive degradation and isolation of the German Empire on the international stage since the fall of Bismarck in 1890 and which culminated in the signing of the Entente Cordiale between France and the United Kingdom on 8 April 1904, during the first phase of the struggle against the Herero, where German forces failed on numerous occasions. At this juncture, an unsuccessful colonial campaign weakened Germany's position vis-à-vis its enemies. Hence, Wilhelm II and the military elite tried to put an end to it by all possible means. This is why they accepted the extreme measures of Major General Lothar von Trotha against the position of the civilian arm of the government, which was more concerned with the country's external image. By contrast, when the defeat of the Russian Empire by the Japanese Empire became irreversible towards the end of 1904, German pressure on the indigenous peoples eased, Trotha's ceasefire was lifted and the negotiated way to end the conflict was accepted.

To develop this hypothesis, I have used official German documents on this campaign, the memoirs of some of its protagonists and the extensive bibliography on the subject as fundamental sources.

Finally, the research is divided into three sections. In the first, we analyse the foreign policy of the German Empire up to the beginning of the rebellion. In the second, the German presence in South West Africa and the causes that led to the revolt. Finally, in the third, we explain the military campaign against the Herero and Nama.

### The frustration of an empire

In 1871, Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck not only succeeded in wresting the rich provinces of Alsace and Lorraine from France after the victorious war waged by the *Norddeutscher Bund* (North German Confederation) against France, but above all he completed his great work: the unification of the German states in the form of an empire, the *Deutsche Reich*, presided over by the Prussian monarch, Wilhelm I. The British *premier*, Benjamin Disraeli, immediately recognised the significance of this event: «The war represents the German revolution, a more important political event than the French Revolution of the last century. ... There is no diplomatic tradition that has not been swept away. You have a new world.... The balance of power has been completely destroyed» (Grenville, 1991: 459).

Over the next ten years, however, Bismarck developed a policy –*Realpolitik*– aimed at preventing a new conflict in Europe –by isolating his great enemy, France– that would jeopardise his great work. Hence his refusal to meddle in the imperialist dynamics in which other states on the continent were involved: «Here is Russia, here is France and here are we, in the centre. This is my map of Africa» (Craig, 1978: 117). Nevertheless, from 1880 onwards, he allowed German expeditions in South West Africa (Namibia) –which caused great irritation in London (Clark, 2014: 177)–, East Africa (Tanganyika), Togo, Papua New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, the Marschall Islands, several of the Solomon Islands and Nauru in the Pacific (Gründer, 2018: 55-65). At the same time, however, he withdrew from Zululand in South Africa so as not to annoy the British, and the two countries jointly defeated the Sultan of Zanzibar and divided up East Africa in 1885. The chancellor even considered several times abandoning German colonial possessions so as not to create sources of conflict with the UK and France (Wehler, 1976, 423).

The result of Bismarck's policy was a set of agreements that allowed him to isolate France completely, while maintaining a solid agreement with the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italy (Triple Alliance, 1882), and a cordial relationship with the Russian Empire (Treaty of Reinsurance, 1888) and the United Kingdom.

However, Bismarck's diplomacy failed with an emerging state, whose position would ultimately lead to his downfall: the United States. The rise of American power after 1870 was overshadowed by the economic, political and diplomatic development of the German Empire. However, Washington had embarked on a policy of commercial expansion beyond continental America, supported by its industrial power and its emerging war fleet (Palmer, 1999, 12-22).

These mercantile interests led to a clash with Berlin in the 1880s in Samoa. As a result of a series of incidents, linked to the internal politics of this territory, and the potential threat of conflict, Bismarck convened a conference in the Empire's capital to discuss the fate of this territory with the United Kingdom and the United States. The final agreement, known as the Treaty of Berlin, established a tripartite condominium over Samoa, as the American representatives had demanded. For German public opinion, this agreement was a real international humiliation, which was used by Kaiser Wilhelm II (1888-1918) to dismiss Bismarck on 20 March 1890 (Herwig, 1976, 14-18).

The fall of the Chancellor meant the end of Realpolitik and opened the way for a new dynamic in German diplomacy: the Kaiser thought in global terms –*Weltpolitik*– as opposed to the realist terms –*Realpolitik*– on which Bismarck had developed his foreign policy. This new policy aimed not only to create a large German colonial empire, but also to make the British Empire Berlin's main ally, while maintaining good relations with Russia, since the strong tension between the two countries in India made it impossible to be an ally of both nations at the same time.

However, over the next fourteen years, the German Empire not only failed to establish an alliance with London, with whom it would end up at odds as a result of Germany's attitude in the Second Boer War (1899-1902) and the Kaiser's decision to build a powerful navy from 1897 onwards, but also lost its privileged relationship with Russia after the renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty in 1890. By contrast, France drew closer to St Petersburg, signing a military convention with Russia in 1892, and to Italy, eager to extend its empire in Libya. The culmination of this dynamic would come on 8 April 1904 when the UK and France signed the Entente Cordiale that allowed London to consolidate its position in Egypt and Paris to initiate a policy of control over Morocco that would take the form of a protectorate (Clark, 2014: 176-188).

However, the most humiliating episodes for Berlin again involved the United States. The first was in 1898, when war broke out between Spain and the United States. Relations between Washington and Berlin had been strained since 1890 and worsened as a result of this conflict. The cause was the confrontation between Commodore and future Navy Admiral George Dewey – commander of the U.S. Navy's Asiatic Squadron, which had defeated the U.S.S.A. Navy, which had defeated Spanish Rear Admiral Patricio Montojo's squadron at Cavite (Philippines) on 1 May 1898– and Rear Admiral Otto von Diederichs –commander of the Ostasiengeschwader (East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron)– during a meeting on the American

flagship, the protected cruiser Olympia. The American sailor told his German counterpart that he would inspect all ships attempting to enter blockaded Manila Bay, which led to a heated argument between the two. Dewey settled the confrontation by saying: «I will stop any ship, whatever its colour! And if she won't stop, I'll shoot her. And if that meant war... if Germany wants war, all right: We are ready» (Herwig, 1976: 31). These words were soon made public, being seized upon by the American press to ridicule the Kaiser and the German Empire.

The second incident occurred during the Boxer Rebellion (1900-1901), provoked in part by the brutality of German soldiers (Weale, 1907, 50-1). Perhaps because of this, the German ambassador Clemens von Ketteler and German missionaries were the first Westerners to be killed. German Field Marshal General Alfred von Waldersee became head of a multinational force of 90,000 men, in which the German contingent –22,000 soldiers– was the largest. However, neither the United States nor France recognised his authority and acted independently (Kuss, 2017: 33).

The third was the lifting of the blockade of Venezuela in 1902-1903, launched by the German Empire, Italy and the United Kingdom because of the Caracas government's refusal to pay its debts. Washington saw this action as endangering the Monroe Doctrine and sent a fleet of 53 ships under Dewey. London withdrew, while the German ships were forced to do so by the presence of the Americans (Herwig, 1976: 76-85).

As a result, the German Empire's influence on the international stage was gradually diminishing, while France's grip on it was tightening. However, Berlin still retained a great deal of prestige thanks to its economic power and, above all, its military capability, which was recognised worldwide. It was at this juncture that the revolt of the Herero and the Nama took place.

### **The Germans in South West Africa. The causes of the rebellion of the Herero and Namá.**

On 1 May 1883, Heinrich Vogelsang acquired the bay of Angra Pequena, today's Lüderitz Bay and five miles inland from the village of Nama in Bethanien on behalf of the Bremen tobacco merchant Adolf Lüderitz. This contract marked the beginning of the German presence in South West Africa (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 2-3). A year later, this territory was acquired as a protectorate rather than a colony. However, its subtropical climate, arid terrain, sparse vegetation, lack of water and difficult communications made the

territory unattractive for colonisation. This is how the German military themselves explained it (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 6):

To understand the events of the war, it is necessary to understand the theatre of war itself, its characteristics, its layout and its climate.

The coastal strip between the Kunene and Orange rivers, which today is the protectorate of South West Africa, is, as already mentioned, a difficult area to access. Only one really good harbour, Lüderitz Bay, and a few less useful harbours, such as Swakopmund, Ogdenhafen, Sandwichhafen, allow the seafarer to land on the coast, which is dangerous due to fog and swell. All landing sites, with the exception of Lüderitz Bay, are exposed to the danger of being gradually dragged northwards by the cold Benguela current. This almost inaccessible coastline is cut off from the interior by an 80-100 km wide, completely desolate belt of completely barren, low-rainfall sand and rock deserts. Only in the far north and south do the water-bearing rivers Kunene and Orcmje show the way inland. However, the deep riverbeds of the Hoanib, Ugab, Omaruru, Swakop and Kuiseb, enclosed by high mountain walls, are water-poor and only slightly favourable to advance from the coast (...).

Only after overcoming the barren coastal strip does one reach the more fertile highlands (...).

The characteristics of the indigenous population (200,000 people) did not favour the presence of Europeans either (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 9-10). The northern part of the territory was inhabited by the Herero, a Bantu grouping of hardy pastoralists who moved their herds across the sparse grasslands between the Namib and Kalahari deserts. Their principal chief, from the late 19th century, was Samuel Maharero. The Nama, the territory's second largest ethnic group, lived in the south. They were immigrants from the Cape Colony, where they had mixed with the Boers, adopted their language and even the Christian religion, and had become expert horsemen and marksmen (Fergusson, 2012: 246). Their «captain» was Hendrik Witbooi, a Christian. Other ethnic groups inhabiting the territory were the Sans (Bushmen) and the Damara. From 1894, Maharero and Witbooi maintained good relations with the Germans after the end of the first revolt they led (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 4-5; Schwabe, 1899). The key figure in this change of attitude was the then commander and later Colonel Theodor Leutwein, governor of the territory who tried to attract white settlers, while at the same time trying to integrate the Herero herders into the German colonial system and maintaining friendly relations with the indigenous people, taking advantage of the great tension between the Herero people and the Namá. This policy was known as the «Leutwein System» (Gründer, 2018: 121-124).

To maintain control over this territory, the governor also had a military force at his disposal: the *Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Südwestafrika* (Imperial Protective Forces for German South West Africa), created on 9 June 1895. The German Empire, unlike the United Kingdom and France, did not create a standing colonial army distinct from the rest of the Armed Forces, nor did it create a specialised officer corps to serve in the Overseas Territories. Instead, it confined itself to creating *Schutztruppe* in its various territories. These forces were supported on numerous occasions by the crews of ships of the *Kaiserliche Kriegsmarine* (Imperial Navy) and native Marine forces, expeditionary corps and auxiliaries. This close relationship with the navy was a consequence of the fact that the *Schutztruppe* were initially integrated into its structure. Only in 1896 did they come under the direct command of the Kaiser through the Colonial Department of the Foreign Office. The following year, the High Command of the *Schutztruppe* was created, commanded by a general, who answered directly to Wilhelm II and the Chancellor. This change was significant because it placed this military force under the direction of a civilian authority (Kuss, 2017: 91).

The hierarchical structure of the *Schutztruppe* was similar to that of modern armies: officers, non-commissioned officers, classes and soldiers. Applications for a commission in the *Schutztruppe* were open to all active officers in the Army or the *Landwehr* (Reserve). The criteria used for selection were primarily professional qualifications (service record) and a strong character. However, no in-depth knowledge of the geography, customs and languages of the colonies was required, although applicants were offered voluntary training in these fields. Service in the colonies was very lucrative. Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers who served in the *Schutztruppe* for an uninterrupted period of more than three years received a minimum 16% and a maximum 100% increase in their pension, as six months of uninterrupted colonial service was equivalent to 12 months in the metropolis. Officers who had been stationed for a minimum of one year in a colony were entitled to collect their pension without having to prove their unfitness for service (Kuss, 2017: 89-94). For their part, their soldiers could be volunteers from the army or navy or recruited from among the natives. A characteristic feature of the *Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Südwestafrika* was its composition: German and also Austrian volunteers, with no natives in its ranks (Schulte-Varendorff, 2007: 386-390). This aspect would be decisive in explaining their behaviour.

The revolt of the Herero and Nama was the product of two parallel dynamics. The first was the economic crisis that broke out among the Herero in 1897 as a result of rinderpest, which wiped out 95 per cent of their livestock, and malaria, which killed 8-10 per cent of their population. This catastrophe forced the Indians to sell their land to the Germans, while incurring heavy debts to German traders and being forced to work as day labourers for white landowners. A process of progressive proletarianisation of the Herero people thus took place, which could mean the end of their existence as a cultural entity. The governor, perceiving the latent danger posed by this situation, tried to alleviate the situation of the indigenous people by establishing a period of limitation of debts, which caused the creditors to demand immediate payment, thus increasing the confrontation between the indigenous population and the German settlers (Gründer, 2018: 126-128).

The second dynamic was inequality before the law, the result of the prevailing racism in the colony, common to the rest of the territories controlled by Europeans. This was a common belief among the white population, which took «scientific» form with the re-reading of Social Darwinism by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel. According to the father of ecology, there were «primitive» races that were in their infancy and needed the supervision and protection of more mature societies, from which he extrapolated a new philosophy, which he called «monism». His works served as a reference and scientific justification for racism and imperialism, and were at the basis of Nazi theories in this field (Larson and Brauer 2009: 59-123). In South West Africa, indigenous people were forbidden to ride horses, own bicycles, go to the library or walk on the pavement, as well as being obliged to greet whites. Moreover, in the judicial sphere, the word of one German was equivalent to that of seven Africans, and crimes committed by whites, including the most serious ones –rape and murder– were punishable by simple fines, while those committed by blacks were punishable by hanging. In fact it was the murder, after an attempted rape, of a Herero chief's daughter-in-law in 1903 that was to trigger the rebellion. At the end of that year, a meeting of Herero chiefs was convened where the rebellion against the Germans was decided. The rebellion began on 12 January 1904. On the orders of Samuel Maharero, his warriors slaughtered 125 settlers on farms near Windhoek. However, they spared the lives of women and children who were handed over to the German missionaries (Gründer, 2018: 128-131; Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 1).

### **A multi-faceted military campaign (1904-1908)**

The external situation of the German Empire and the Herero revolt played a decisive role in triggering the military operations that followed. However, in order to understand their scope, it is necessary to refer to four dynamics.

The first, the Imperial Military Culture. According to Hull, this was characterised by the use of extreme violence as the best solution for dealing with politico-military problems (Feld, 1977: 71-84). This approach entailed the search for a «final solution» that would provide «permanent results» (Hull, 2005: 1). «Such thinking led to a desire to exterminate» (Hull, 2005: 100) the enemy, whether internal or external. However, this was not an exclusive characteristic of the military of the Second Reich. On the contrary, parallel to the unleashing of the German Unification Wars, the Russian Empire set about exterminating the Circassians, a Muslim people living in the Caucasus with whom the Russians had been in conflict since the 18th century. In 1857, Count Dimitry Milyutin, the future Minister of War, wrote: «to eliminate the Circassians would be an end in itself: to cleanse the land of hostile elements» (King, 2008, 94). As a result, between 1864 and 1867, 400,000 Circassians were killed and 490,000 expelled from their land. Only 80,000 Circassians continued to live in their region of origin. What's more. During the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877, the Tsar's soldiers did not hesitate to rape Circassian girls who had taken refuge in the Balkan territory under Turkish control (Richmond, 2013: 103).

Second, the emergence of a new form of warfare: Total War. This form of combat originated as a consequence of the sum of elements that emerged in the three great revolutions that defined the First Modernity (1789-1870) –Liberal, National and Industrial– and was defined by considering as enemies not only the combatant soldiers, but also the peasants who provided food for the troops, the employees of the railways that transported them, the factory workers who supplied them, and any civilian who might support the soldiers (Ludendorff, 1964: 15). Its first manifestations were the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) (Förster and Nagler, 2002: 295-310 and 501-549). The campaign against the Herero and Namá was a further manifestation of this form of conflict.

Third, the racism. The Germans could not accept that an «inferior race» defeated them on the battlefield, discrediting them internationally (Haussler, 2021: 19-22). It was

precisely this unprecedented fact that may explain the extermination orders issued by General Trotha after the unsuccessful battle of Waterberg on 11 August 1905.

The fourth, German military doctrine, defined by four theorists: Frederick II (1740-1788) –mobile warfare and *oblique order* to overwhelm the enemy from the flank, thus achieving a quick victory (Frederick II, 1793: 17-18, 123, 126)– whose principles were embodied in a famous phrase: «Unsere Kriege kurtz und vives seyn musen» (Prussia's wars must be short and intense). Brigadier General Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), the first military thinker who began to consider the importance of the decisive battle as opposed to the small victories on which Frederick II relied, and who defined the different types of war – in accordance with Hegelian dialectics– according to the political objectives pursued: these could be limited –not to defeat the enemy completely– or absolute –his complete destruction–. The latter form of war, he called «absolute war» or *Vernichtungsschlacht* (War of Annihilation), as it involved an extreme unleashing of violence (Clausewitz, 1999: 682-685). It was considered the basis on which the idea of Total War was later articulated. Thus, Basil Liddell Hart (1946: 205-208) held the Prussian military theorist responsible for the great slaughters of the First World War. Finally, Field Marshal General Helmuth von Moltke *The Elder* (1800-1891) and Alfred von Schlieffen (1834-1914), who defined «the mobile, offensive, concentric, single battle of annihilation (the “Schlieffen Plan” of World War I) and, when unsuccessful, the hot pursuit to force the enemy to provide another opportunity for annihilation» (Hull, 2005: 45-47). The campaign against the Herero and Nama was conducted according to these premises, although the end result was not what the Germans had hoped for.

The operations against the Herero people were divided into three phases. The first phase lasted from January to June 1904. During this period, the strategy of Samuel Majarero and the rest of the indigenous leaders focused on disrupting communications, destroying the Swakopmund-Windhoek railway and telegraph lines, and laying siege to fortified settlements in the north of the protectorate. At all times, however, they respected the lives of women and children. In the first two weeks of the conflict, the Indians killed 158 men, but only five women and no children were killed in the fighting, as an eyewitness acknowledged (Rust, 1905: 140). However, the German press and eyewitness accounts portrayed the Indians as «savages» who murdered women and children and mutilated men (Hull, 2006: 10-11). For

his part, Leutwein tried his best to restore order and protect the 4,640 German settlers, even though he faced three serious problems from the beginning of the conflict. The first was the revolt of the Bondzelwarts, a Nama group living in a 45,000 square-kilometre territory in the southwest with 300-400 warriors. To fight them, the governor had sent the 2nd Field Company under Captain Victor Franke (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 17 and 19). Second, the terrain over which the fighting was to take place: «the area mainly considered for the war between the coastal strip and the Kalahari steppe, the terrain of the extreme north, is flat» (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 7). The third, linked to the previous one, was the small number of troops at Leutwein's disposal (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 12-13):

A weak Schutztruppe, which, after accounting for those on sick leave and those unfit for service, Schutztruppe, which, after accounting for those on sick leave and those unfit for service, counted 27 officers, nine doctors, three veterans, one paymaster, 729 men and about 800 horses. It was divided into a police force and a field force of about 500 men (...).

The troops were distributed over an area of about 900 km (...)

The armament of the Schutztruppe consisted of the 88 rifle and the 71/84 infantry rifle. The clothing was the Schutztruppen uniform, which had been tried and tested for years, of grey corduroy, soft felt hat, high boots of natural-coloured leather (...).

Given the natives' almost superstitious fear of the effects of artillery before the war, the supply of guns was of particular importance. Five 6 cm rapid-fire mountain guns and five L/73 field guns from earlier times were available for station defence; four 5.7 cm rapid-fire guns were being repaired in Germany. The Schutztruppe had a total of five machine guns.

After the revolt began, 1,141 more reservists were mobilised. However, this was an insufficient force, even if 82 sailors from the Habicht, a German gunboat sent to the region after the outbreak of the uprising, were added (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 16). Faced with this situation, the Kaiser –who from the outset considered the revolt to have been encouraged by the British (Bülow, 1931: 19)– ordered the head of the Colonial Office, Oscar Stübel, on 17 January 1904 to form the Marine Expeditionary Corps, which, mobilised at an accelerated pace, was to start its journey to South West Africa on 21 January. Its functions were (Admiralstab der Marine, 1905: 1):

1. Restoration of order in the protectorate by all available means.
2. Occupation of the country's capital.
3. Ensure communication with the coast.
4. If the railway is interrupted, re-establish it.

On 3 February, 231 men arrived under the command of Captain Alfred von Winkler (1912: 5-11), while the Marine Corps and the unit commanded by Major Hermann Ritter, totalling 741 men, arrived on 9 February. Among the officers sent was Major Ludwig von Estorff, one of the greatest experts on colonial warfare in the German Empire (*Admiralstab der Marine*, 1905: 97). Leutwein was thus left with about 2,000 front-line men to face some 8,000 Herero warriors equipped with little more than 4,000 rifles. This numerical inferiority forced the governor to focus his operations on the built-up areas. In the ensuing actions, Germans and Herero suffered similar casualties: 210 and 250 respectively. However, the battles of Ovikokorero (13 March), Onganjira (9 April) and Oviumbo (13 April) demonstrated the Germans' inability to defeat the Herero, although the Indians suffered heavy casualties (Hull, 2006: 22). Against this background, Berlin sent further reinforcements and operations were suspended until their arrival (*Großer Generalstabes*, 1906: I, 127). In May, the German military presence amounted to 4,654 frontline soldiers (Kuss, 2017: 51-52). At the same time, the Herero, encircled by the Germans, began to retreat with their families and livestock to the Waterberg massif –on the edge of the Omaheke Desert– from where they hoped to begin negotiations. This retreat to an area far from the railway lines forced the Germans to transport their supplies by ox cart, which posed a logistical hazard of the highest order.

In these circumstances, Leutwein then drew up plans to provoke a decisive battle at Waterberg, with the aim of inflicting a final defeat on his enemies as a prelude to initiating peace talks (Hull, 2006: 27). In Berlin, however, the Kaiser, surprised by a revolt that had turned into open warfare, decided on a change in leadership. On 3 May 1904 he relieved Leutwein in command of operations by Major General Lothar von Trotha, a veteran of the colonial campaign in Tanganyika (1894-1897) and China (1900-1901), where he had demonstrated a harshness in dealing with the natives and a strong racism (Hull, 2006: 25-27; Kuss, 2017: 38). This decision of the Kaiser was made against the Chief of the Great General Staff Schlieffen, the Prussian Minister of War, Major General Karl von Einem, Oscar Stübel, and Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, especially the latter two who thought the general was «a man only capable of thinking in purely military terms» (Bley, 1998: 155, 159).

The general arrived in June 1905, and the second phase of the campaign began. Trotha followed the strategy of his predecessor, whose aim was to defeat the Herero in a

decisive battle. His aim was not the physical extermination of the enemy, but to put down the revolt in a conventional battle. To achieve this, he had 4,000 men armed with 1,500 rifles, 30 artillery pieces and 12 machine guns. Samuel Maharero had 6,000 armed men and 54,000 non-combatants under his command. Trotha arranged his men in six divisions to outflank, surround and annihilate the Herero. The battle took place on 11 August and the troops advanced according to plan. However, one of the divisions was diverted to seize the mission building in the area. This action forced the Herero to retreat south, where they met the weakest German unit –Hayde Division– at the Hamakari watering hole. The Germans were overwhelmed –three officers and 22 soldiers killed– preventing the Herero force from being surrounded. The indigenous warriors, under Maharero's command, moved into the desert, accompanied by their wives and children and some of their livestock. In their flight they left behind all their valuables: skins, ostrich feathers, the rest of their livestock, weapons and ammunition (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 152-184). Trotha thus lost the opportunity to achieve a great victory that would have increased his and the German Empire's prestige. The decisions he took from this point onwards cannot be understood without considering the frustration that this failure caused him. Similarly, the attitude of Schlieffen and Wilhelm II to the general's decisions was linked to the surprise produced by the inability of the German troops to defeat the Herero.

After the failure at Waterberg, Trotha set out to pursue his enemies in order to force a new battle and prevent them from taking refuge in Bechuanaland –under UK control– and using this territory as a base from which to launch new operations. The general ordered Colonel Berthold von Deimling and Major Victor Franke and Major Estorff on 13 August to launch a pursuit operation along the area between the end of the prairie and the beginning of the desert. These forces would be instrumental in the end of the campaign by progressively pushing the Indians into the desert (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 185-187). Shortly thereafter, he issued a set of regulations stipulating that all «plundered cattle» should be driven to collection stations whenever possible, giving absolute priority to the «destruction of the enemy» and expressly forbidding any form of negotiation with the enemy. However, Trotha also expressly forbade the shooting of women and children, although some German soldiers did attack non-combatants, for, as Leutwein stated, it was «natural after all that has happened that our soldiers showed no leniency. Moreover, it is natural that a superior officer would not order such leniency to be shown» (Kuss, 2017: 59).

Nevertheless, cruelty and acts of brutality by German soldiers towards the indigenous people occurred on a daily basis (Häussler, 2021: 13). However, this new campaign failed again, as Trotha did not have the necessary forces to cover such a vast terrain and to face a mobile enemy. This was demonstrated by his attempt to force a new decisive battle at the end of August (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 198). This new setback further radicalised his position, and he opted definitively for exterminating his enemies. On 13 September 1904, when he learned that scattered groups of Herero were trying to gather at the Eiseb River, he intensified his pursuit to push them back into the desert, achieving his goal on the 28th, although the German troops were unable to pursue them for lack of water: «Once again, and this time in sweltering heat, the troops had to cross the road, polluted by the stench of countless corpses» (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 199-202). His aim was to seal the border with the Omaheke and let the Herero die of dehydration. This decision –a pure manifestation of Total War where combatants and non-combatants were no longer distinguished– was justified by Trotha in a report sent to Berlin (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: I, 207):

No effort or hardship was spared to strip the enemy of the last vestige of his power of resistance; like a half-dead deer he was driven from watering-hole to watering-hole, until at last he was left without will, a victim of the nature of his own country. The waterless Omaheke was to complete what the German guns had begun: the destruction of the Herero people.

But was this the common position of the entire German military? Apparently not, as Estorff and Lieutenant Colonel Karl Ludwig von Mühlenfels were highly critical of the general's decision (Zimmerer, 2011: 183; Häussler, 2021: 167). These divergences show that the annihilation campaign against the Herero people was not the result of a particular military culture –as Hull claimed– but a product of circumstances and Trotha's decisions, as Benz (2007: 37) argued. The culmination of this dynamic came on 2 October, when the general issued his famous «Words to the Herero people». In this proclamation, after warning the Herero that they should hand over their leaders - offering a reward in return - he threatened them with extermination, without distinction of categories, as it included women and children. The indigenous people thus became outlaws in their own country (Hull, 2006: 55-59).

However, despite the harshness of its content –a reflection of the Total War conception on which Trotha had built his campaign after the Battle of Waterberg– this proclamation was issued when the destruction of the Herero people had already begun. In Berlin, they were immediately aware of the general's words. Wilhelm II and Schlieffen, frustrated by their inability to defeat their enemies, accepted them without hesitation. In a letter from the latter to the chancellor dated 23 November 1904, the chief of the Great General Staff stated that peace with the insurgents could only take place in the form of unconditional surrender (Häussler, 2011: 64). In contrast, the political elite, led by Bülow, quickly understood the damage this proclamation did to the international image of the German Empire and convinced the Kaiser on 8 December to order their withdrawal (Hull, 2006: 63-66). Significantly, the Chancellor's success came only two days after the Japanese seizure of Port Arthur, which significantly improved the position of the German Empire. Not only was the Russian Army weakened, but St. Petersburg's relations with Paris had been weakened by the latter's refusal to help the former in order not to break its recent friendship with the United Kingdom, an ally of Japan. Bülow did not hesitate to link the two conflicts –the Herero rebellion and the Russo-Japanese War– although he gave much more importance to the latter (Bülow, 1931: II, 19). Moreover, and this was no minor detail, the tsar's troops also clashed with non-Whites (Häussler, 2021: 33-34).

The repeal of Trotha's proclamation marked the beginning of the third phase of the campaign, in which the Herero were interned in concentration camps or used as forced labour on German property and in German enterprises. The protagonist of this phase was no longer Trotha, who was dismissed on 19 November 1905, but a civilian, Friedrich von Lindequist, who became governor of the colony, after successfully dismissing the general and taking command of the *Schutztruppe* (Hull, 2006: 63-66). This event demonstrated, together with the withdrawal of the «Words to the Herero people», that civilians were once again in control of the territory after the end of the military campaign.

At the same time as the Herero rebellion, in October 1904 the Nama revolted under the leadership of their captains Hendrik Witbooi and Jakob Morenga (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: II, 1). The causes of this outbreak were to be found in the treatment meted out by the Germans to their ancestral enemies, the Herero, and the perception that they might suffer the same fate, for without Leutwein's protection; they would succumb to the demands of the German settlers. The uprising took place on the same terms as the Herero uprising: the

Nama attacked German farms, killing 60 men but sparing the lives of women and children. From the outset, however, their movement was limited by its small size, as it was centred on Rietmond and Gibeon, mobilising less than 2,000 warriors (Kuss, 2017: 53-54).

The German campaign against this rebellion was conducted in three phases with the same limited success as in the north and using the same means. In the first, the Kaiser's soldiers, led by Colonel Deimling, sought a decisive battle that would enable him to encircle and destroy his enemies. They almost succeeded in doing so in the homeland of the Witbooi Namá –the most important group of this people– who were forced into battle at Rietmond and Auob, their homeland, in December. However, as at Waterberg, the Indians escaped, although they abandoned 15,000 head of cattle, supplies, arms and ammunition (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: II, 1-106). The second phase began in December 1904 and was marked by two events. First, Witbooi and his commanders came to the conclusion that a pitched battle with the Germans was suicide. From then on, they opted for a mobile guerrilla war that would allow them to defy the Germans and force a negotiation. The Indians attacked German stations, transport columns, posts and detachments, inflicting losses that, while not decisive, weakened the morale of the German soldiers and forced them to remain inactive, as supplies and water had to be transported by bullock carts from the coast. The second was Trotha's refusal, in despair at the use of his enemy's guerrillas, to engage in any kind of negotiation. Indeed, on 23 April 1905, unable to defeat his enemies, the general issued a proclamation threatening the Nama with the same punishment as the Herero had received if they did not surrender (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: II, 107-208; Erichsen and Olusoga, 2018: 178-187). This phase ended on 29 October with the death of Hendrik Witbooi in an attack on a car belonging to a German battery. The third phase was marked by the collapse of the Nama's power - after the loss of their leader - and the dismissal of Trotha on 19 November. At this point, German commanders considered the Nama tactics so effective and the terrain so inhospitable that this war could not be won (Erichsen and Olusoga, 2018: 193). Therefore, they abandoned the idea of the decisive encircling battle and opted instead to organise mobile detachments to pursue and destroy the troops. This new tactic, coupled with the lack of Nama cohesion after Witbooi's death, and a more open position to negotiate surrender terms, led most Nama groups to abandon the fight. This campaign ended in March 1908 with Captain Friedrich von Erckert's successful expedition against Simon Kopper, the

last Nama leader to fight the Germans (Großer Generalstabes, 1906: II, 209-382; Hull, 2006: 67-69). The Nama prisoners were sent to concentration camps where they were to live with the Herero.

These establishments were set up on *Shark Island* –a peninsula– and in the main towns of the colony: Okahandja, Omaruru, Karibib, Keetmanshoop, Lüderitz Bay, Swakopmund and Windhoek. They were initially under military control, but after Trotha's dismissal their administration passed to civilians, except for the first one, until they were closed on 27 January 1908 (Häussler, 2021: 10). The harsh living conditions resulted in the deaths of 7,682 of the 17,000 internees –15,000 Herero and 2,000 Nama– between October 1904 and March 1907 (Hull, 2006: 89). Thus, 45 per cent of all inmates. However, although the death toll was very high, it did not exceed the number of deaths in the concentration camps set up during the Second Boer War (1899-1902). The British took 28,000 Boers prisoner, sending 25,630 to camps in Bermuda, Ceylon, India and St. Helena. Another 27,927 non-combatant Boers –elders, women and children– died in camps set up in South Africa, and 20,000 blacks of the 120,000 imprisoned. In total, 50,000 non-combatants lost their lives in these establishments (Clive, 1957: 31; Mongalo and Du Pisani, 1999: 170).

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The campaign against the Herero and Nama was a sad experience for the German Army, which lost 2,000 men out of 14,000 sent and forced an expenditure of 585 million. In fact, the budget debate was so arduous that it led to the dissolution of the Reichstag and the calling of the «Hottentot elections» in 1907 (Häussler, 2021: 12). For the Herero and Nama, the consequences were more catastrophic. It is estimated that 75-80 per cent of the Herero population –some 100,000 before the conflict, 16,000 after it– and 50 per cent of the Nama population –20,000 before the conflict, 9,000-13,000 after it– died (Kuss, 2017: 55).

## Conclusion

The revolt of the Herero and Nama in German South West Africa - a consequence of the harsh economic and political conditions under which these peoples lived - occurred at a particularly unfavourable international juncture for the German Empire, prompting a punitive campaign by the kaiser government and army that resulted in the near-total destruction of both peoples. At no time, however, was this an orchestrated genocidal operation, but a Total War aimed at defeating the enemy in a battle of annihilation in order to enhance the prestige of the German Army. The impossibility of achieving this triumph,

coupled with racism and contempt for non-whites in Europe, led to a radicalisation of the German command's position –Major General Trotha– which sought the physical annihilation of the enemy, without distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants.

This position was initially encouraged by Wilhelm II and Schlieffen, astonished and frustrated that a group of black rebels could challenge the world's strongest military force and call into question its war doctrine. It was only when the international situation changed as a result of the defeat of the Rurian Empire by the Japanese that the Kaiser decided to change his position, influenced by the negative consequences of these extermination actions for the image of the Empire, encouraged by the civilian elite of the government. Precisely this conflict between civilians and the military, which would manifest itself again during the First World War and even within the military elite itself – Estorff and Mühlenfels *versus* Trotha– demonstrates the non-existence of a German military culture of genocide and a continuity between the events in South West Africa and the actions unleashed during the Second World War. Nor can this continuity be established by the same considerations in the Russian case between the Circassian genocide and Stalinism.

In fact, there was not even continuity between this campaign and the First World War. The Great General Staff made no assessment of the military actions triggered by this revolt –as it had not done for the American Civil War– and thus could not determine why the strategy on which German military doctrine was based –the decisive battle by a double flank to destroy the enemy and achieve victory in a short-lived war– had failed:

The esteemed Prussian/German war machine did not live up to expectations, although its organisation and performance had been considered exemplary throughout the world. With the greatest effort and sacrifice, it achieved results that hardly anyone was satisfied with, indeed, that hardly anyone foresaw (Häussler, 2021: 13).

Just over 10 years after the Herero revolt began, the Battle of the Marne (6/12 September 1914) would take place, where German troops again failed to encircle and destroy the French and British forces.

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