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BOOK REVIEW

The Revolt of the Hereros. Jon M. Bridgman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981. Cloth \$14.95; 192 pp.

The Germans created more than one holocaust in the twentieth century. Bridgman tells the story of the war fought between the Africans and Germans in South West Africa (Namibia) from 1904 to 1907, and the subsequent annihilation of the Herero and Nama peoples by the Germans. The book, in essence, is an account of how "a few thousand poorly armed Africans held the world's greatest military power at bay for three years" (p. 7).

Until the outbreak of the war there had not been any significant military contact between the Africans and the Germans. Then, in 1903, the Germans began drawing up plans to place the Africans on reserves in order to appropriate their pasture land. The roots of the war lay in the increasing loss of African land to settlers and African cattle to unscrupulous traders, along with not so subtle calls for African extirpation. The Africans were determined that if they had to die they would die fighting.

In January 1904 the Herero-speakers rose in revolt under the leadership of Samuel Maherero, intending to drive the Germans out of their land. But in August of that year the Germans, under the command of van Trotha, were able to surround the Herero concentration in the Waterberg mountains and proceeded to annihilate them. Those Herero who were not militarily overcome at the time were allowed to escape into the desert to certain death or to return emasculated, only to be placed in concentration camps, or they were killed later during the constant Herero man-hunts conducted by the Germans, especially in 1905. A few individuals, including Maherero, escaped into Bechuanaland (Botswana) where many of them were interned by the British.

Within two months of the Waterberg battle the Nama to the south, who also sensed imminent extermination, commenced warfare under the leadership of Hendrick Witbooi. For the next three years the Witboois (Nama) and their allies carried on a war with the Germans that was successful over such a long period because their fewer numbers allowed them to disperse and use guerrilla warfare.

At the same time as the Nama war there was the activity of Morenga, the highly-respected leader of a band of men who raided the German farmers for their cattle and German military posts for horses and arms. At first Morenga fought alone, but after Witbooi's defeat he was joined by some of Witbooi's captains.

Morenga became a major figure in the continuance of the war, and in the words of the author, for four months his band of a few hundred "literally ran circles around the whole German army" stationed in South West Africa.

To the Germans the revolt of the Africans constituted a "race war." To the Africans it was not only a fight for their land, but also for their survival as a people. The author shows evidence that extirpation was contemplated by the settlers even before the war began. This desire to annihilate the Africans became more widespread as the war intensified. Van Trotha, who commanded most of the war, said the following prior to the defeat of the Herero:

There is only one question for me: how to end the war? The ideas of the governor [Leutwein] and the other old African [German] hands and my ideas are diametrically opposed. For a long time they have wanted to negotiate and have insisted that the Hereros are a necessary raw material for the future of the land. I totally oppose this view. I believe that the [Herero] nation as such must be annihilated or if this is not possible from a military standpoint then they must be driven from the land... (p. 128).

Of the 80,000 Herero at the start of the war, only 20,000 remained at the end of 1905. About 5,000 of this number had either escaped into British territory or joined the Ovambo and Nama. Another 15,000, mostly women and children, were in German concentration camps. Of the 60,000 dead, many died at Waterberg, but thousands more perished in the desert or were killed upon their return.

The Nama loss was also devastating. Out of an estimated 20,000 people in 1904 less than half were still alive in 1911. Most of the deaths took place in the concentration camps. For the Germans:

The only effective way to break the will of the enemy was to kill so many of them that the few survivors would submit to their rule. Victory, then, could be obtained only by terror--terror on a massive scale, terror which spared neither old nor young, neither children nor non-combatants (pp. 170-71).

Those few thousand Herero and Nama that survived the concentration camps were subjected to forced labour statutes, pass laws, and vagrancy laws, and they continued to perish by the hundreds under this oppression. No Africans, except the Ovambo,

were permitted to own land or cattle. The Ovambo, who numbered 100,000, made up half the African population at the beginning of the war. They initially joined the Herero by storming a German outpost in their land, but they withdrew after their first major loss of fighters and never again entered the war.

Bridgman is adept at inferring the military strategy of the leaders on both sides of the conflict, recounting day-to-day conduct of the war, and he makes an attempt to understand the roots of the struggle and why it culminated in annihilation. However, his book has several faults which render it deficient as a historical text. In the first part of the book Bridgman continually refers to Maherero and Witbooi by their first names, but he never does that with the Germans. He also uses the derogatory name, "Hottentot" for the Nama; a "linguistic" term created by the Boers in South Africa, and now superseded by the more acceptable term "Khoisan," with its divisions into San and Khoikhoi. In addition, Bridgman's "Map 1: Bantu Migration Patterns, 1600-1800" (p. 15), shows Bantu-speakers crossing the Zambesi river into southern Africa only in the seventeenth century. This view has no basis in fact, and is merely the propaganda of the white racist South Africans whose own ancestors only arrived in the late seventeenth century. It is their attempt to justify taking land from the Africans by saying that they all arrived there at the same time. In fact, Bantu-speakers arrived in southern Africa at least 1200 years before the dates in this map and suggested in the text.

More useful to the text would have been more information on the migration to South West Africa of the descendants of Dutch-Asian and Dutch-African (Khoisan) unions, such as the Witbools and others (so-called Hottentots). These societies arose in the South African Cape frontier and emigrated to South West Africa in the seventeenth century. They, along with the Herero, were in the process of forming nations when the war began, but unfortunately the author takes little account of that development, and how it may have influenced the struggle. Bridgman also does not discuss the relationship of the Namibian struggle to those of other Africans in southern Africa where settlers took root.

The story could also have been given a wider perspective by showing the extent to which the British, who feared the spread of this "race war" they felt the Germans had created, actively collaborated in ending the rebellion. Bridgman gives us a glimpse of British connivance when he mentions that many Africans who escaped into British territory were interned. But, we could ask, did the British intensify their border watches? And what became of the interned?

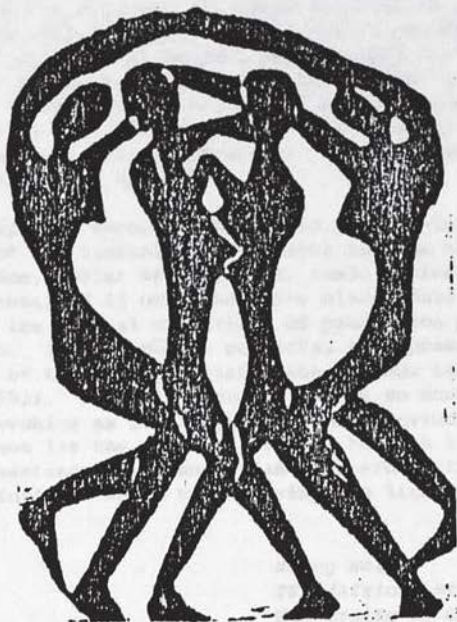
Looking beyond this period, questions could also be raised about what impact the annihilation of half the African population

had on subsequent colonial developments in Namibia and the initiation of the present liberation struggle in the late 1950s. Bridgman treats these topics too briefly.

One other book length account of the 1904-07 Namibian war addresses many of the questions raised in this review,* and is now available through Monthly Review Press in New York. Bridgman's book is primarily oriented to the progress of the war and thus needs to be supplemented by other studies if it is to be of any use in African history courses.

* Horst Drechsler, "Let Us Die Fighting": *The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism (1884-1915)*, trans. Bernd Zöllner (London: Zed Press, 1980).

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