

Shark Island

The First German Concentration Camp

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Cover: Photomontage from three different images. Background image: Between 1905 and 1907 the Herero camp was located here – today the place is part of a campsite. © K. Lembke, 2022. Black and white photo above: Settlement of captured Herero in the Lüderitz Bay. © Sam Cohen Library Swakopmund, Düring-Album, Inv. No. PA 08/143. Image below: The situation of the Herero camp at the end of 1905. © Sam Cohen Library Swakopmund, Inv. No. A-0LL-5505. Frontispiece: Geoscientists Simon Fischer and Erman Lu surveying the former conversion of the concentration camp. © K. Lembke, 2022.

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“... the growing good of the world
is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things
are not so ill with you and me as they might have been,
is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life,
and rest in unvisited tombs.”

George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1872)

20 January, 1942. In a villa on the Wannsee, high-ranking representatives of the government meet with SS authorities to deliberate on the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”. The objective is to organise the deportation of millions of Jews and prepare their targeted extermination. This marks the beginning of the darkest period in German history.

1951. The first edition of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is published. The author, who had to flee from Germany a Jewish refugee in 1933, not only analyses the emergence of National Socialism and Stalinism and their similarities, but also traces a direct line from imperialism to totalitarianism. According to Arendt, colonialism was pivotal to the rise of inhumane racism and contributed to the mass murder of Africans. She observes that this ideology, which denied Jews their humanity, was later transferred to Europe a few decades later.

December 2001. Caspar W. Erichsen travels to Lüderitz with a group of Namibian students. They also visit Shark Island, the former German “Hafischinsel”, which housed a concentration camp from 1905 to 1907 (fig. 1):

“I was particularly uncomfortable with the many monuments planted in the centre of the island that paid homage to just about everything related to Lüderitz, it seemed, except for the many Nama and Herero people who had died in the concentration camp on Shark Island. Instead, the centrepiece of the island was a small circular wall, listing the names of German soldiers who had passed away in the course of the Herero and Nama wars. Knowing that there had not been any battles or even skirmishes in Lüderitz, it struck me as particularly odd to so solemnly remember a group of soldiers who had most probably died of disease;

especially venereal ailments were common in those days.”¹

Upon returning to Windhoek, Erichsen seeks to learn more about Shark Island and discovers that there is virtually no literature on the camp. This sparks the idea for his master’s thesis and later his dissertation. In 2010, together with David Olusoga, he finally publishes the book *The Kaiser’s Holocaust. Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism*. Erichsen adopts Hannah Arendt’s theory of a connection between colonialism and the extermination of Jews by the National Socialists. He extends this connection further: By referring to the genocide of the Jews as the “Kaiser’s Holocaust”, he equates it with the racist persecution of Africans.

Erichsen’s research broke the spell that had hung over the Shark Island camp for decades. In 2013, Jonas Kreienbaum defended his dissertation in Berlin on ‘A Sad Fiasco’. *Colonial Concentration Camps Around 1900*, which was published in German in 2015, followed by an English translation in 2019. Taking a different position than Casper Erichsen, he emphasizes that the mass deaths in the camps in German South West Africa were not the result of a deliberate policy of extermination.

At the same time, Melina Koumides wrote a master’s thesis in Vienna in 2014 entitled *The Genocide in German South West Africa. Cause and Development. Memory and Forgetting*. Here, she formulates her personal concerns:

“My motivation for dealing with Germany’s colonial past, and specifically with this topic in the scope of a master’s thesis, stemmed from two reasons. First, during my history and politics studies, I noticed that the European colonial past, in this case Germany’s, plays a very minor role in the public sphere, at schools and also



Fig. 1 Sunset on Shark Island, the former 'Haifischinsel' (in German). In the foreground is the place where members of the Nama were held captive under inhumane conditions during the colonial period.

universities. (...) (Second,) Europe (...) today has, like never before, economic and political crises and major problems in coping with the flow of refugees, including from former colonies. It also has problems in shaping a European, unified asylum policy. An awareness of the common European past could be helpful. Only if Europe's past is addressed in this respect will it be possible to find a common, responsible approach."²

A final chapter of exploration was opened in June 2022, when a small group of German archaeologists and geophysicists travelled to Lüderitz to document the remains on site³. To their surprise, they found not only underground traces of the former camp, but also remains of buildings, fence posts and numerous foundations (see ch. 6). These ruins now make it possible to draw a more accurate picture of the concentration camp and to reconstruct what happened there and when. For the first time, the results are presented comprehensively in this volume.

A New Old Discipline: Historical Archaeology

In the 21st century, archaeology can no longer be reduced to the exploration of past eras or even the discovery of treasures. The historical value of archaeological research now also lies in the study of contemporary historical sites that are still very present in our cultural memory. This "historical archaeology" has now established itself as a sci-

ence in its own right. In contrast to the archaeology of prehistory, it relies on a variety of other sources, such as written documents, photographs and sometimes even sound recordings, in addition to surveying the site. The actual archaeological fieldwork employs methods that are also used to investigate cultures deep in the past.

In several projects for the preservation of historical monuments or at departments of German and Austrian universities, the focus is now on the 20th century, e. g. the documentation of wartime events or internment camps. In this regard, there was nothing methodologically new about conducting archaeological fieldwork in a former concentration camp. Nevertheless, we were breaking new ground because this type of research is highly unusual on the African continent. In Namibia, archaeology entails the exploration of rock paintings, and has not yet been used to treat phenomena of recent history. Thus, this project, the results of which are presented in this volume, represents an important turning point in the understanding of German colonial history.

A Warning: Images of Horror

The war against the Herero and Nama, like the concentration camp on Shark Island near Lüderitz, is associated with horrific images. At the express request of the Namibian co-author, we have decided to publish them here. Images of starving people, hanged men and severed skulls may frighten and

Missionaries, Settlers and Soldiers

The origins of the colony of German South West Africa and the war against Herero and Nama

Katja Lembke

The history of the Germans in South West Africa began in the early 19th century, with the arrival of missionaries paving the way for merchants and politicians. The first missionary was Johann Heinrich Schmelen, who came from the vicinity of Bremen and had joined the London Missionary Society. In 1814, he founded the town of Bethany between Keetmanshoop and Lüderitz. His house, which is the oldest surviving European stone building in Namibia, is now a museum (fig. 1). Together with his wife Zara, a Nama woman he married in 1813, he spent seven years translating the New Testament into the local language.

Despite his successes as a missionary, he remained a lone figure for a long time. It was not until 1825 that the Wesleyan Missionary Society became active in what is now Namibia. In 1842, the Rhenish Missionary Society finally began missionizing the country. In addition to Bethany, it also established further posts in Windhoek and Berseba. Even before the first German “Schutzgebiet” (protected area) was declared in South West Africa, the Society had set up four additional posts and contributed

significantly to the spread of Christianity among the Nama and Herero people¹.

Adolf Lüderitz and the First German “Schutzgebiet”

The German colonial period in present-day Namibia began in 1884 with the establishment of the initial “Schutzgebiet” (protected area). Bremen merchant Adolf Lüderitz was the pioneer in this endeavour, seeking to secure one of the last uncolonized regions on the African continent for Germany (fig. 2). His partner, Heinrich Vogelsang, travelled to Cape Town in 1882 to explore potential mineral resources (fig. 3). Ultimately, they chose the bay of Angra Pequena. However, the area was already inhabited. It was ruled by the Nama leader Joseph Fredericks, with whom Vogelsang concluded a contract on 1 May 1883. The two parties agreed that the bay and the land within a radius of five geographical miles would be sold to the Lüderitz company in exchange for 100 pounds of gold and 200 rifles. This contract is now referred

Fig. 1
The first German missionary, Johann Heinrich Schmelen, lived in this house. In 1814, he founded the settlement of Bethany between Keetmanshoop and Lüderitz.





Fig. 2
On Shark Island, formerly “Haifischinsel”, the Senate of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen donated a memorial stone for Adolf Lüderitz in 1953.

to as the “mile swindle” because Vogelsang left it unclear whether the miles were to be English miles, measuring about 1.6 km, or German miles, measuring about 7.5 km. Lüderitz later assumed the more lucrative German miles, which triggered a futile protest from the Nama. In August, another contract was signed in which Lüderitz bought the coastal strip from the Orange River, the border river with South Africa, to the 26th degree of latitude, and an area 20 miles inland for the price of 500 pounds and 60 rifles. Once again, the shrewd

merchant exploited the differences in measurement units used by the English and Germans. He wrote to Vogelsang: “For the time being, let Joseph Fredericks believe that it is 20 English miles.” Thus, the duped Fredericks sold an extensive part of his tribal area, roughly 300 × 150 km!

Lüderitz then became active in Germany, demanding Chancellor Otto von Bismarck safeguard his possessions. However, Bismarck was initially sceptical about the wishes expressed in the Reichstag



Fig. 3
In the immediate vicinity of the Lüderitz monument a metal plate commemorates the “first pioneer” Heinrich Vogelsang.