

Why Shielding Us From the History of German Colonial Atrocities in Africa is Wrong in Every Way



Phil Musolino

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DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, The Federalist magazine published an article by Casey Chalk which warmly hugged a book lauding German colonial conduct in Africa.

Turn-of-the-20th century slavery, concentration camps, forced labour, planned starvation, medical experimentation on humans and extermination become just gauzy backgrounds to really nice German ports and railroads.

Chalk got his headline right. ‘It’s Time to Tell the Truth about Colonialism In Africa’. He got almost everything else wrong.

Chalk warns that criticism of European colonial brutality will invite similar criticism of how our forefathers “interacted with

indigenous peoples, whether in Africa or the Americas”.

It's not hard to see how Chalk's fears led him to Bruce Gilley's drive-by titled 'German Colonialism and How Its Critics Empowered Nazis, Communists and the Enemies of the West'.

But whitewashing Europe's colonial history not only insults Africans in the same way that attacks on our forefathers offend Americans, it paves the way for more of the same.

Let's start with their paradigmatic 'Exhibit A': The Herero.

By 1876, 85 000 Herero were living in then South West Africa. In April 1885, Otto von Bismarck sent Dr Heinrich Ernst Goering, father of the Nazi Reichsfeld marshal, to administer that region.

By 1900, imperial Germany and its commercial enterprises had imposed new boundaries on the Herero by armed force, and through exorbitant commercial pressure.

This included unconscionable debt collection practices and withholding medicines and vaccines.

German colonial official Paul Rohrbach argued: “The decision to colonise... means nothing less than that the native tribes must withdraw from the lands on which they have pastured their cattle and so let the white man pasture his cattle on the self same lands....

(T)he loss of their free national barbarism and the development of a class of workers in the service of and dependent on the whites is primarily a law of existence in the highest degree.”

When Matthias Erzberger, speaking in the Reichstag, pointed

out that black men had immortal souls just as the Germans did, he was hooted down.

The German Colonial Federation demanded that: (a) “every coloured person must regard a white man as a superior being”; and (b) “in court, the evidence of one white man can only be outweighed by the statements of seven coloured persons”.

DEADLY DECREE

On 19 January 1904, the German military commander insisted that “the Hereros be disarmed, ruthlessly punished, and made to do forced labour on the railroads”.

The Germans appointed the despicable general Lothar von Trotha, who announced: “I know the tribes of Africa.... They are all alike. They only respond to force.

It was and is my policy to use force with terrorism and even brutality. I shall annihilate the African tribes with streams of blood and streams of gold.”

On 2 October 1904, Von Trotha issued his infamous ‘Shrecklichkeit’, or extermination order, which decreed: “Any Herero found within the German borders with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall no longer receive any women and children. I will drive them back to their people or I will shoot them. This is my decision for the Herero people.”

As history recounts: “The Germans... 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... 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...”

THE CAMPS

Between 1905 and 1908 the majority of the Herero survivors were incarcerated in concentration camps. They were branded with the letters GH (gefangene Herero).

“Herero prisoners were subjected to extreme forms of exploitation, abuse and mistreatment.

Missionaries were unable to prevent women and girls from being subjected to sexually degrading (behaviour and) rape.”

The women were put in spans of eight and had to pull carts like draught animals. Many were half-starved and died of sheer exhaustion. Those who did not work well were brutally flogged.

Throughout the concentration camp system, no fewer than 7 682 Hereros, nearly half of those condemned to the camps, died because of brutal treatment.

German geneticist Eugene Fischer started his racial medical experiments in those camps. A book he wrote about his findings, ‘The Principle of Human Heredity and Race Hygiene’, was a favourite of Adolf Hitler.

Fischer later became chancellor of the University of Berlin, where he taught medicine to Nazi physicians, including Josef Mengele.

After a century of denial, on 28 May 2021, German foreign minister Heiko Maas conceded: “We will now officially call

these events what they were from today's perspective: A genocide.”

Americans are far better suited to the defence of the defenceless than the defence of the indefensible.

The Herero will never fear nor forget the horror of their enslavement and near extermination.

Neither should we.

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The opinions expressed here are those of the author alone, and not necessarily those of his clients.