



BOOK REVIEW

Mads Bomholt Nielsen. *Britain, Germany and Colonial Violence in South-West Africa, 1884–1919: The Herero and Nama Genocide*

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The history of colonial violence is starting to be written from transcolonial or transimperial perspectives, and the abovementioned work is one of the first books entirely devoted to this subject. It has however an important predecessor in Ulrike Lindner's 2011 entangled history of German and British colonialism in Africa (*Koloniale Begegnungen*), which included many of the same cases as this book. In his introduction, Bomholt Nielsen correctly identifies two main problems in existing work on colonial violence around 1900: the national fragmentation of research and (often as a corollary) prevalent notions of national exceptionalism—as Bomholt Nielsen notes for instance for German colonial violence, the links that have been drawn between it and the Holocaust tend to obscure the wider colonial contexts (5–6). To argue against such notions, Bomholt Nielsen focuses on the manifold British–German entanglements in South-West Africa between 1884 and 1919, with a focus on the 1904–1908 war and genocide against the Herero and Nama. The study, however, is not a treatment of both the German and British side, but rather focuses on what Bomholt Nielsen calls the “British factor”: the British and South African perspectives on, and involvement in, colonial violence in German South West Africa (3).

Bomholt Nielsen first offers a general chapter concerning British perceptions of German colonialism, German South West Africa's history, and the colony's transimperial entanglements, which he sees mainly in the adoption and adaptation of settler-colonial models, and concentration camps. This transimperial aspect, however, remains rather superficial. As one example, the German commander Lothar von Trotha is presented as “an ardent follower of Charles Edward Callwell's instructions,” (26) implying that Trotha had actually read the work of the British theorist of colonial war, for which there is no evidence. The book also does not attempt to conceptualize transimperial reservoirs/transfers of knowledge. The only transimperial histories referenced date back to 2015 and before, neglecting the field's small boom thereafter.

To be fair, the predominant thrust of Bomholt Nielsen's work is a different one. Its main value actually lies in it being a cautionary tale against the assumption of too much imperial cooperation. The author argues particularly against the historiographical assumption that “racial solidarity” was one of the main influences in German–British colonial interactions, showing convincingly that this is an “oversimplification” (9). He does so mainly by bringing international diplomacy back into colonial history, demonstrating that interests of state could often lead to non-cooperation. Crucially, he also compares British reactions to the

simultaneous Congo atrocities, which clearly reveals how Britain considered some countries (like Germany) boys “too big to interfere with” when it came to colonial violence. Reports of German atrocities that the Government received were generally carefully “managed” and often kept secret (123).

A large part of the book is taken up by the analysis of several transcolonial entanglements of German South West Africa and its British neighbors, such as border-crossing Nama fighters, cross-border trade, British concern for the spread of unrest over the border (be it by Africans or Boers), or British military observers in German South West Africa. Most of these cases are already well known, having been analyzed mainly by Lindner and Tilman Dederig. Laudable is Bomholt Nielsen’s portrayal (despite the meager sources) of the internment and apparent neglect of Herero/Nama refugees in South Africa. Overall, however, the novelty of these sections is primarily in systematically bringing together these cases under the aspect of the British diplomatic interests at stake, the tension between interests in London and at the Cape, and in emphasizing instances of non-cooperation.

The final and biggest chapter is on World War I and its immediate aftermath, when German South West Africa was taken over by South African forces and an atrocity narrative was crafted in the so-called Blue Book that would discredit the German ability to continue ruling its colonies. While this history has also been analyzed before, Bomholt Nielsen argues a valuable middle position in the polarized debate on the evidence value of the Blue Book, not discarding it as propagandistic fiction but emphasizing how its compilation was guided by British diplomatic interests. Taking the trouble to trace the original affidavits and the selection and omission process for the Blue Book, he is able to argue this persuasively and comes upon some revealing omissions. Particularly insightful is also the simultaneous exploration of the installation of South African rule over German South West Africa, which soon brought forward many instances of colonial violence as well. Here, as throughout the book, Bomholt Nielsen emphasizes continuity in colonial violence and the pervasive hypocrisy of the supposed British humanitarian concern for the “native populations”—even if he states that there were certainly imperial actors who genuinely believed in British moral superiority, and that the German genocide in German South West Africa in the end was not colonial “commonplace” (200).

Two smaller critical remarks at the end. First, Bomholt Nielsen makes a bit too much of the 1905–1906 war reports of the British attaché Frederick Trench. He frequently asserts that Trench documented the German genocide (by which he probably means the death and suffering in the camps, not the Herero dying in the Omaheke), but it remains unclear whether Trench interpreted the events in such a way; he never spoke of extermination. Whether Trench was indeed as emotionally invested as claimed must also remain undecided. The earlier conclusion by Lindner that Trench overall found the violence rather inconspicuous cannot be definitely rejected on the grounds of the material presented, and that the more subdued passages in Trench’s reports are due to German monitoring or (self-)censorship is speculative. Second, the copyediting of this book appears to have been careless. There are regularly jarring mistakes in punctuation and the doubling of words or even sentence structure. That said, this work is overall a relevant intervention in the debate, particularly in problematizing the notions of imperial cooperation and “racial solidarity,” and in bringing diplomacy back into (trans-)colonial history.