

# In Absentia of Black Study

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Last week, the German government offered a recognition of its early 20th century genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama people in what was then German South West Africa. After a rejected compensation offer of €10 million in 2020, Germany announced it would describe its race war practices against the indigenous peoples of Namibia as a genocide and would pay €1.1 billion “to existing aid programs over 30 years.” This comes out to about the same amount of annual development funding that Germany has given Namibia since its independence in 1990, including infrastructural projects and €50 million “towards setting up a foundation for reconciliation between the two states.” The deal was born out of bilateral negotiations between the German and Namibian governments. Notably, multiple traditional leaders and representatives of the affected communities have rejected this deal, including Ovaherero Paramount Chief Vekuii Rukoro who described it as “an insult,” a fair assessment of the crafty discursive transformation of ongoing disbursements of development aid into grand conciliatory gesture.

This alleged deal, which has been celebrated by many Germans as a political and moral success, has arrived in the midst of a potentially paradigm-shifting debate about German statecraft. On one side rests the insistence on a genocide exceptionalism, a singularity of Germany’s genocide of Jews; and on the other, there exists various articulations of a historical relationship between the genocidal violence of German imperialism and atrocities committed in Europe during World War II. There is a strange sentimentalism attached to insistences on genocide uniqueness: there has been some deliberate imputation of rhetorical red herrings and unmade intellectual claims (for example, the idea that structural relationality or continuity is synonymous with causation) that betrays disciplinary and epistemic shortcomings and investments alike.

In “The German Catechism,” Dirk Moses laid out the five-part foundation of the German state’s post-war political theology. First, is the claim that the Nazis’ genocide was unique and exceptional because it was the *Vernichtung der Juden um der Vernichtung willen*, ie. the extermination of Jews for the sake of extermination itself. That ideological targeting denoted, secondly, a *Zivilisationsbruch*, or civilizational rupture (per Dan Diner). Per the mythos, Germany broke from the practice of just, regulated European warfare and was subsequently punished by the Nuremberg trial, which attempted to serve as a juridical righting of Nazi wrongs and, for the first time, brought the then-infant concept of genocide into the fold of international criminal law. Thus, Germany has thirdly, a particular responsibility to Jews in Germany and to the state of Israel birthed from this attempted extermination and racism towards Jews (i.e. antisemitism) that is, fourthly, a distinctly German racialized prejudice distinct from other forms of racism. Finally, and fifthly, any oppositions to the self-determining politics of the state of Israel constitute antisemitism; to this end Germany is an emphatic adopter and enforcer of the International Holocaust Remembrance Association’s definition of antisemitism.

To understand the political character, national ethos, and development path that eventually yielded the brutalities of Nazism’s genocidal violence, I feel compelled to begin with Germany’s first materialization of *Lebensraum*. The first iteration of this settler colonial “living space” coupled territorial expansion with a biologization of Germanness as superior whiteness contra, here, to the barbarism of uncivilized Africans who held no legible claim to this *German* land. In understanding *Lebensraum* as a land-based

definition of German self and racialized other, one can deploy Michelle Wright's notion of blackness as not simply a thing being defined, but also in the "when and where it is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations."

Germany began its colonization of Berlin Conference-obtained South West Africa in 1884. In classic settler form, the arrival of Germans and competition over land quickly necessitated the elimination of native peoples. The 1904-08 Herero Wars saw the devastating extermination of 80% of Ovaherero people and nearly half of the Nama. Examining the scientific afterlife of this genocide via anti-blackness and its relationalities with other racializing frames and practices helps us better understand the prevailing imperial frame within which Wilhelmene and Nazi racecraft was enacted via *Lebensraum*. In looking at the work of influential anthropologist Eugen Fischer, for example, his study of the mixed-race communities in Rehoboth came to influence Germany's anti-miscegenation policy: from the 1908 and 1912 criminalizations of mixed race marriages in the German colonies and metropole, respectively, to the *jus sanguinis*-based 1913 Nationality Law, to his influence on Adolf Hitler and the creation of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws. The transmutation of racial frames from South West Africa to the lands and populations of Eastern Prussia permits a tracking of the trajectory of Germanness' calcification as whiteness: German citizenship's preclusion of blackness and Jewishness and other impurities necessitated racial hygiene science, enforced segregations, and then, necessarily, genocide. Writing on antisemitism in the French empire, Dorian Bell refers to the "tendency of racializing logics to change scales in an effort to resolve contradictions internal to the logics themselves" as *racial scalarity*. *Racial scalarity* can duly be understood as the ways that "it was as possible for race to produce space as for space to mediate race." Racialization occurs across scales and across space and time, and where "racialization processes are mutually constitutive of one another" per Claire Jean Kim's racial triangulation theory, the relationship between genocidal German racializations becomes increasingly clear.

Studying blackness, engaging in Black study, has privileged an embrace of what Wright describes as *Epiphenomenal time*, a "'now,' through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted" through a rejection of "direct, or linear, causality" (as well as cheap political analogy). There needn't be a claim of causality for a meaningful acknowledgement that Germany's colonial ambition folded itself into post-World War I politics in the metropole, that the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama people brought mass extermination into the arsenal of biopolitical possibility, or that Nazi *Lebensraum* had markedly settler colonial characteristics.

The focus on blackness, for me, offers a constant reminder that these historiographic debates have very real stakes. More pressing than contestations about whether the German path from Windhoek to Auschwitz was a direct, indirect, or non-existent one is the inconsistency with which experiences of genocide are regarded. Despite colonialism acting as the foundation for Raphael Lemkin's coining of the term—he was influenced significantly by the Ottoman Turkish genocide of the empire's Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek populations, as well as Spanish colonization in the Americas—there is stunningly little space for indictments of European colonial genocides and the possibility of retroactive redress. Because as we debate whether or not Nazi genocide is exceptional or historically connected, the victims of Germany's prior genocide are being presented an insulting and undignified bare minimum: survivor communities are expected to accept this rhetorical recognition (an admission of guilty rather than an apology) without meaningful compensation despite their long-held maxim that there actually cannot be recognition without reparations. Germany's recognition *cannot* possibly be celebrated as the first step on

the long road to reconciliation in no small part because Ovaherero and Nama communities continue to suffer the spiritual, cultural, and metaphysical wound of their murdered ancestors still being incarcerated in German (and other) archives and museum institutions despite previous state repatriation ceremonies.

The glaring absence in this debate around continuity is that of Black study and of Black people themselves: the shocking deprioritization and disinterest in both living and dead Black people, the abstracted treatments of African/Black people as subjects of historical contemplation when there are communities enduring continuations of colonial dispossession and still demanding recompense for their suffering. What is the function of depoliticizing attempted extermination as simply an “ideological” matter as though there are not, per the violent dictates of the Westphalian system, clear and distinct political motivations for othering, demonizing, and attempting to exterminate entire peoples? What if this story were to begin with indigenous Namibians rejecting the deal rather than that critical rejection being relegated to an end-of-story afterthought in western news coverage? What if African materialities comprised a major core of the debate rather than simply our interpretations of the violence of their oppressors? What if the Ovaherero and Nama were entrusted as suitably reliable narrators such that we held their worldviews, historical interpretations, ongoing traumas, and calls of reparations as *our* defining truths?

Events are certainly unique but rarely exceptional. Understanding deep interconnectedness of historical event and process rather than solely linear progression can only strengthen our understandings of historical events and the potential for solidarity born out of that *true* recognition. A sustained engagement with Black study can help to facilitate this.

This article was originally published on the *New Fascism Syllabus*' weblog series, “The Catechism Debate.” For the full list of hyperlink citations, please consult the original online version at: <https://newfascismsyllabus.com/category/opinions/the-catechism-debate/>.