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Rivers of Blood and Money:
The Herero Genocide in German Southwest Africa

Thomas Burden

In Memory of Dr. Jack Thacker,

Whose words of encouragement on the quality of this paper lifted my spirit and reaffirmed my crumbling belief in my abilities as a student of history. Who taught me and generations of other students the meaning of being a historian and teacher, but above all else the need to truly love what you do.

Thank you sir.

The history of African colonialism is filled with stories of atrocity perpetrated under the guise of cultural or racial superiority. The death of 32,000 civilians in British concentration camps during the Second Boer War, and the horrors perpetrated in the Belgian Congo are only two examples of the effects of European imperialism in Africa.¹ When the Herero people rebelled against the German colonial government in 1904, the *Schutztruppe* and colonial officials responded with a brutality that mirrored their fellow European colonizers.² However, unlike the other European powers, Imperial Germany cast their conflict with the Herero in terms of a racial struggle in which the vanquished would face extinction. Relying on decades of research by prominent German intellectuals, Imperial Germany used the tenets of social Darwinism and eugenics to justify European colonialism and the genocide of “inferior” races as a positive good.

Despite the obvious influences of the Herero genocide on Nazi policy, it is also an important part of the history of colonialism. Scholars like Helmut Pogge caution that seeing Southwest Africa as a precursor to Nazi tyranny ignores the importance of the Herero genocide to colonial studies.³ While it is true that colonialism and Nazism are not directly correlated, they are linked by an ideology whose hallmarks included racist pseudo-science and the devaluation of human life. In short, German Southwest Africa should be studied both as an episode in the violent history of European colonialism, and as the forebear of the atrocities committed in WWII. This can only be accomplished by understanding what drove Imperial Germany to pursue its exterminatory policies toward the Herero. Understanding the origin of these concepts and

¹ David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide And The Colonial Roots of Nazism*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 3.

² Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 8.

³ Birthe Kundrus, “German Colonialism: Some Reflection On Reassessments, Specificities, And Constellations,” in *German Colonialism: Race, The Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, Edited by Volker Langbehn, and Mohammad Salama (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 38.

their application in Southwest Africa accomplishes both of these goals.

I: German Lebensraum and the Herero Response

“Lasting success a government can only win if the necessity is recognized for securing a people’s Lebensraum and thus its own agricultural class.”-Adolf Hitler.⁴

In 1883 Heinrich Vogelsang, an explorer and agent of German trader Frederich Luderitz,, made landfall at Angra Pequena along the Southwestern African coast.⁵ Vogelsang immediately began negotiations with the local Nama Chieftain, Joseph Fredericks, to establish Angra Pequena as a German territory and trading post.⁶ This marked the beginning of German activity in Southwest Africa, and was part of a plan which Luderitz hoped would create new trade opportunities for Germany. Following the 1873 economic crash the dream of Luderitz and other German industrialists for economic expansion was threatened by instability. Fear of economic decline prompted Luderitz to attempt to persuade the German government to adopt a policy similar to the British colonial model, which included economic exploitation of natives enforced by a minimal military presence.⁷ Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck refused to accede to Luderitz’s pleadings, reasoning that the cost of supporting colonial endeavors would far outweigh the benefits.⁸

Bismarck’s refusal to finance German colonial expansion was opposed by industrialists, the Junkers, and by a majority of the German public due to growing fears of cultural decline. Prior to Unification Germany experienced a massive population boom, which combined with the growth

⁴ Woodruff D. Smith. “Frederich Ratzel and the Origins of Lebensraum,” *German Studies Review*, Vol. 3 No. 1, (Feb. 1980): 62.

⁵ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser’s Holocaust*, 29.

⁶ Olusoga, and Erichsen, *Kaiser’s Holocaust* 32.

⁷ Ulrike Lidner, “German Colonialism And The British Neighbor in Africa Before 1914,” in *German Colonialism: Race the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, Edited by Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama, (New York: Columbia University, 2011), 256.

⁸ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser’s Holocaust*, 33.

of industrial city-centers to push millions of Germans to emigrate.⁹ Seeing the rising tide of factory labor and the loss of German citizens, *Volkisch* theorists like Frederich Ratzel feared that Germany would lose its cultural vitality if industrialism and immigration were not circumscribed.¹⁰ Ratzel argued that agrarianism was the only true life for Germans, and that new land, or *lebensraum*, was needed to offset the moral decay caused by industrialization.¹¹ Ratzel knew that finding German *lebensraum* would require conflict, which he believed was inevitable and beneficial for the *Volk*. However, Ratzel noted that conquest should only be engaged when the goal is to establish an agrarian society.¹² That Ratzel looked to Africa as the ideal locale for the *Volk* to regain its vitality is clear from his writing. In *Political Geography*, Ratzel reasoned that because Southwest Africa was the most populous colony it should become the first agrarian zone in the effort to revitalize German society.¹³

While Ratzel's views would eventually become part of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* thanks to the influence of his secretary Rudolf Hess, the German colonial government also shared Ratzel's views. Governor Theodor Leutwein, who assumed office in 1894, argued that the colonists wanted the Herero to rebel so they would have a pretext to deprive them of their land.¹⁴ While expressing regret that the Herero labor supply would be diminished, Leutwein also lent credence to the colonists' ambitions when he argued that a show of force was needed to subjugate the

⁹ Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "The Purpose of German Colonialism, or the Long Shadow of Bismarck's Colonial Policy," in *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, Edited by Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama, (New ork: Columbia University Press, 2011), 195.

¹⁰ Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 194.

¹¹ Smith "Ratzel and Lebensraum," 59.

¹² Smith, "Ratzel and Lebensraum," 54.

¹³ Benjamin Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz: How German Southwest Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed By the Nazis in Eastern Europe," *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2005): 433.

¹⁴ Lieutenant Thomas Leslie O'Reilly, "Chapter 6: Leutwein and the Protection Agreements," in *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 27.

Herero to German control of Southwest Africa.¹⁵ In short, German land ownership, and the establishment of an agrarian community in Southwest Africa depended on the inevitable conflict that Ratzel theorized would occur.

In 1884 a show of military superiority was out of the question for the German colonists, as there were few troops in the colony.¹⁶ In light of their numerical weakness, protection treaties were deemed a suitable means of gaining a foothold in Southwest Africa. Dr. Heinrich Goring, the father of future Nazi leader Hermann Goring, relied on the war between the Witbooi Nama and the Herero to force the fearful Maharero Tjamuaha, the Herero's paramount chieftain, to sign a protection treaty.¹⁷ However, in 1885 Maharero Tjamuaha renounced the treaty and threatened Goring with death if he did not leave Herero territory immediately.¹⁸ When Goring fled all hope for German colonization of Southwest Africa appeared to leave with him, but a power struggle in Herero leadership was about to occur. In 1890 Maharero Tjamuaha died, and by right his eldest Nephew, Nikodemus of the eastern Herero people, should have become paramount chieftain. However, Governor Leutwein managed to use his influence under the second German-Herero protection treaty to install Tjamuaha's youngest son, Samuel Maharero as the new paramount chieftain.¹⁹

Samuel Kariko, a survivor of the 1904-1907 genocide, informed the British that Samuel Maharero was an alcoholic, and that Leutwein used this weakness to force him to sign away Herero land for use by the German colonists.²⁰ By 1900, the 1200 German settlers who lived in

¹⁵ O'Reilly "Leutwein and the Protection Agreements," 32.

¹⁶ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 47.

¹⁷ Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly, "Chapter 2: First Acquisitions of Land," in *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 15.

¹⁸ O'Reilly, "First Acquisitions of Land," 16.

¹⁹ Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly, "Chapter 8: The Hereros of Southwest Africa," in *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 42.

²⁰ Dr. Felix Meyer, "Chapter 8: The Herero of Southwest Africa," in: Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 43-44.

Southwest Africa had ample land to use for their farms, which Ratzel and German officials at home deemed necessary for the survival of the *Volk*. Though he was effectively a puppet of the German colonial government, Maharero came to regret his actions. Samuel Kariko, recounted a conversation when a sober Maharero, expressed his frustration with the loss of Herero land, but conceded that he was under Leutwein's thumb and could do nothing.²¹ Using protection treaties that they never planned to honor, and manipulation of the Herero leadership, the German colonists gained the *lebensraum* that they could not seize through force, at least for the moment.

Once the Herero conceded their right to land ownership the colonial government next sought to remove their economic independence. The Herero culture depended heavily upon cattle, which acted as their primary food supply, source of income, and were used in religious ceremonies.²² The economic disenfranchisement of the Herero began in the 1890s when the German colonists forced the Herero to trade their cattle for consumer goods. For instance, Samuel Kutako recounts how an unnamed German colonist forced him to trade one of his cows for a pair of corded pants.²³ When cattle could not be procured through unfair trade the Germans resorted to confiscation for alleged trespasses on their land. When one unnamed Herero attempted to retrieve his cattle the German farmer who seized them demanded he trade two of his sacred cows in return.²⁴

The German government turned a deaf ear to the Herero's request for mediation in the seizure of their cattle. To the Germans it was natural that the Herero, as their subjects, grant

²¹ Hosea Mungunda, "Chapter 12: The Value Set On Native Life By The Germans," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918):52.

²² Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 109.

²³ Samuel Kutako, "Chapter 11: Gradual Appropriation of Herero Land, and Violation of Herero Customs," in *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918):49.

²⁴ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 111.

whatever concessions deemed necessary to the *Volk*. The German colonists adopted the view of the Herero's racial inferiority by looking to their race scientists. Since, as Wilhelm Schallmayer argued, self-preservation was essential to the survival of the stronger, it was essential that the Germans take what they wanted from the allegedly inferior Herero.²⁵ While the German colonial government believed that the Herero should remain subservient, this did not mean that they were not aware of the dangers of their actions. The 80,000 Herero still vastly outnumbered the 1200 colonists who settled in Southwest Africa, whose firepower and military presence remained negligible. But just as with the protection treaties, the German colonial government continued to rely on the mediating influence of Samuel Maharero to prevent his people from taking action.

When hostilities commenced on January 12th 1904 European and American media outlets covered the conflict extensively. By the spring of 1904 newspapers like the *L.A. Times* began to issue reports that placed land and cattle seizures as the catalyst for the Herero to rebel.²⁶ The loss of cattle was also an important factor according to the November 18th edition of *The Dominion*, which noted that the Herero, who had possessed 90,000 head of cattle in 1897, had less than 45,000 in 1902.²⁷ Both of these problems were exacerbated in 1897 when a disease called the *rinderpest* wiped out entire herds of Herero cattle, forcing many to become servants for the German colonists.²⁸ While foreign observers were right to view economic disenfranchisement as motivating factors, it was the violation of the Herero's basic human rights that finally pushed Samuel Maharero to rebel.

Louisa Kamana, the daughter of Omaruru Herero Under-Chief Kamana, became a

²⁵ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 29.

²⁶ "Traders to Blame: Cause of the Herero Uprising Rapacity of Germans who Bled Natives Until They Rebelled," *Los Angeles Times* March 25th 1904: 4.

²⁷ "German Misrule in Africa: British Official Report, A Damning Indictment," *Dominion*, Vol. 12 Issue 48, Nov. 1918: 3.

²⁸ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 100.

symbolic representation of German abuses, and proved to be the breaking point for the Herero. Louisa's husband, Barmenius Zerua, stated that a German colonist, named Dietrich, shot his wife while she slept in a covered wagon with their newborn infant.²⁹ Zerua goes on to state that the Herero believed that Dietrich had attempted to rape Louisa while she slept with her infant son.³⁰ Rape and other forms of violent assault had increased once the Herero were forced into servitude by the *rinderpest*, and the response of the colonial courts was minimal. As Lieutenant O'Reilly, author of the British "bluebook" on German atrocities in Southwest Africa noted, the few cases where German men were tried for rape or murder rarely yielded serious punishment. Dietrich was sentenced to 3-5 years imprisonment for murdering Louisa, which was commuted after eleven months.³¹ This light sentence for the murder of a Herero Under-Chief's daughter ensured tension created by years of abuse finally boiled over.³²

Cases where German colonists were tried for the beating death of their Herero servants were also treated leniently. As in the other cases of violent crimes, the court was loath to sentence the perpetrator to more than three years imprisonment, which was often commuted after less than a year.³³ In contrast, Herero who retaliated against the abuse of their employers, or defended their wives from assault received much harsher punishments, with flogging and death being most common.³⁴ Commenting on the Herero's outrage over the flogging death of a servant, Governor Leutwein argued that the Herero did not understand the difference between murder,

²⁹ Barmenius Zerua, "The Value Set on Native Life By The Germans," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 54

³⁰Zerua, "The Value Set on Native Life," 55.

³¹ Daniel Kariko, "Chapter 12: The Value Set on Native Life By The Germans," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 53.

³² "Alleged Brutality of German Settlers," *Grey River Argus*, May 30th 1904: pg. 4.

³³ Kariko, "The Value Set on Native Life By the Germans," 54.

³⁴ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 117.

and death as a result of justified punishment.³⁵ For Leutwein and his fellow Germans, death as a result of the Herero's failure to meet their employers' expectations was not murder, it was simply a natural part of the colonial system in which they lived. Captain Maximilian Bayer's comments after the Herero genocide are even more draconian: "the law of nature allows only the strong to have continuity, while the weak disappear from the earth."³⁶ For the Germans, the Herero's only living purpose was as a labor source, and when they no longer performed that service their lives ceased to matter.³⁷

After years of abuse, of having their land and economic independence taken from them, the Herero finally rebelled in January 1904. Like the rebellions faced by their colonial adversaries, the German colonists could have avoided bloodshed if they recognized the basic humanity of the Herero. Instead, they adhered to the ideas of *Volkisch* and Social Darwinian theorists and refused to recognize their own fallibility. By the summer of 1904 the German colonists would drop their assertions of civility, reasoning that the Herero's employment of barbarism justified their own descent into brutality. In a speech before the Reichstag in October 1904, Hermann Paasche argued that the Herero were merely "laboring animals" who could be disposed of at will.³⁸ Now that their colonial subjects rebelled Imperial Germany could engage in the "great racial struggle" that the German intelligentsia considered key to human evolution, and the superiority of the *Volk*. The systemic murder of the Herero would grant Germany crucial *lebensraum*, and remove the blight of an inferior race whose very existence threatened evolutionary progress.³⁹

³⁵ Theodor Leutwein, "Chapter 12: The Value Set on Native Lives By Germans," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 53.

³⁶ Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz," 436.

³⁷ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 184.

³⁸ Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz", 443.

³⁹ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 197.

II: The Great Evolutionary Struggle

*“My intimate knowledge of many Central African tribes has everywhere convinced me that the Negro does not respect treaties, but only brute force.”-
Franz Otto Von Trotha.⁴⁰*

On January 12th 1904 the German-Herero settlement at Okhandja was engulfed in gunfire and confusion. Lieutenant Ralph Zurn erroneously interpreted the arrival of one hundred Herero horsemen as the beginning of a planned rebellion.⁴¹ In reality the Herero came to Okhandja seeking Samuel Maherero’s mediation in an inheritance dispute, not to attack the German settlement.⁴² This unfounded fear prompted the German colonists to flee to the local *Schutztruppe* fortress, and within hours shots rang out, announcing the beginning of the Herero rebellion. There are no records stating who opened fire first, but as Dr. Arendt argued in the Reichstag, the suppression of the rebellion outweigh the facts surrounding what prompted it.⁴³ Now the German colonists were free to justify seizing all Herero lands, and more importantly, had a pretext to unleash a violent campaign which would culminate in the first genocide of the twentieth century.

Immediately the German press began to issue propaganda designed to perpetuate the notion of Herero barbarism. Reprinting an article appearing in *The Associated Press*, the January 27th 1904 edition of the *L.A Times* noted that the Herero savagely burned and dismembered German settlers.⁴⁴ The American and British press latched onto the false reports of the German

⁴⁰ Jan Bart-Gewald, “The Great General of the Kaiser,” *Botswana Notes and Records*, Vol. 26 (1994): 69.

⁴¹ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser’s Holocaust*, 126.

⁴² Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser’s Holocaust*, 127.

⁴³ “Germans Beaten Off: Herero Inflict Heaviest Losses Of Campaign,” *The Washington Post*, March 20th 1904: 3

⁴⁴ “Savages Burn Germans Alive,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 27th 1904: pg. 4.

government, which also included alleged Herero assaults on German women.⁴⁵ This helped perpetuate the myth that Germany was engaged in a just struggle for survival. In truth, Samuel Maharero had mandated that German women and children not be attacked, as it was only German soldiers, and men who could become soldiers, who were a threat.⁴⁶ Moreover, the only German male civilians who were attacked were those who had been exonerated by the courts for raping Herero women.⁴⁷

These and other facts were ignored by the German colonial government, who never believed that the Herero were civilized. This stereotypical view was carried by other colonial powers, including Britain and France, however, these powers made at least token attempts to “Europeanize” their subjects. For the German settlers, improving the Herero was impossible, and they looked to the arguments of scientists like Ernst Haeckel and August Forel, who argued that only Europeans were capable of civilization, as justification.⁴⁸ Moreover, according to Social Darwinist Alfred Kirchoff, non-European races were incapable of culture, and animated by an immoral spirit which made them innately criminal.⁴⁹ Ludwig Zu Reventlow expounded this belief in the Reichstag when he questioned the basic humanity of the Herero, arguing that their actions made them “mere beasts.”⁵⁰ Using the concepts of race science, the German colonial government cast themselves as the agents of cultural progress, and the Herero as a savage race whose extinction would only benefit humanity.

Kaiser Wilhelm II also adhered to these pseudo-scientific beliefs, as indicated by his

⁴⁵ “Herero Slay Many Germans: Troops Defeated in Southwest Africa in Engagement With Native Tribes, Seven Officers Killed,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 20th 1904: pg. 13.

⁴⁶ Daniel Kariko, “Chapter 13: The Outbreak of the Herero Rising and the Humanity of the Herero,” in Lieutenant Thomas O’Reilly’s *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 56.

⁴⁷ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser’s Holocaust*, 121.

⁴⁸ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 160.

⁴⁹ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 184.

⁵⁰ Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz”, 440.

approval of the *Schutztruppen*'s harsh policies against the Herero. In a speech before the Reichstag on November 8th 1905, Wilhelm II argued that the Herero rebellion represented a threat to Germany's colonial protectorates, and that the nation was indebted to the *Schutztruppe* for their actions.⁵¹ Wilhelm II expressed similar sentiments during the Boxer rebellion, where he encouraged the German army to massacre Chinese rebels.⁵² These overt calls for violent reprisal inspired European observers to begin referring to Germans as "Huns," thus perpetuating the myth that Imperial Germany was uniquely militaristic in its colonial policy.⁵³

Despite the Kaiser's enthusiastic call for retaliation against the Herero, the German army underestimated their adversary. Early in the campaign, Governor Theodor Leutwein led the *Schutztruppe* against the Herero at Owikokera on March 13th 1904.⁵⁴ The Herero ambushed the *Schutztruppe*, firing from elevated defensive positions, resulting in the death of seven German officers, and 19 soldiers.⁵⁵ Casualties became so heavy that by January 1905 *The Press* reported that ten percent of the *Schutztruppe* had died.⁵⁶ The Herero's early successes were astounding in light of their lack of supplies. Referring to the beginning of the rebellion, Heinrich Tjaherani, the youngest son of the Omaruru Herero Chief Tjaherani, noted that most Herero had less than twenty cartridges for their rifles.⁵⁷ The German army was better supplied and provisioned, however they lacked the Herero's knowledge of the terrain and their motivation for war, thus ensuring their early defeats. In a letter to Governor Leutwein dated March 6th 1904, Samuel Maharero noted that it was the Germans who were solely responsible for the conflict, and that it

⁵¹ Kaiser Wilhelm II, "The Kaiser on Southwest Africa: Reichstag Speech by Wilhelm II," (November 28th 1905): 1

⁵² Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 202.

⁵³ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 105-106.

⁵⁴ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 20th 1904, 13.

⁵⁵ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 20th 1904, 13.

⁵⁶ "The Herero Rebellion: What the War is Costing Germany," *The Press* January 18th 1905, 7.

⁵⁷ Heinrich Tjaherani, "Chapter 13: The Outbreak of the Herero Rising and the Humanity of the Herero," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 58.

would be better to face death than continue living under German oppression.⁵⁸ Unfortunately for Maharero, this worst case scenario would come to pass, and his people would almost cease to exist.

Embarrassed by the setbacks the *Schutztruppe* were facing, Wilhelm II removed Governor Leutwein from the field and appointed General Adrian Dietrich Lothar Von Trotha as his replacement on June 11th 1904.⁵⁹ Von Trotha was an experienced colonial fighter, serving in both the Boxer rebellion and in the campaign to pacify German East Africa.⁶⁰ Upon his arrival Von Trotha immediately changed the German campaign from a policy of pacification and disenfranchisement to one of extermination. This new policy was made immediately clear to Governor Leutwein who asked that Von Trotha spare enough Herero to be used as forced labor.⁶¹ In response, Trotha assured Leutwein that his intimate knowledge of Africans had convinced him that only force could remove the threat they posed to further German settlement.⁶²

Von Trotha's assertion that he had "studied" Africans enough to characterize them as savages echoes the argument posed by Social Darwinists like Wilhelm Schallmeyer, who reasoned that destruction of the racially inferior was a necessary prerequisite for the superior race to assume dominance of the world.⁶³ Alongside of the focus on racial struggle, Von Trotha's call for violent reprisal echoed Ratzel, who reasoned that conflict between Europeans and native peoples was an essential component of human evolution.⁶⁴ Until Von Trotha's arrival in

⁵⁸ Samuel Maharero to Theodor Leutwein, 3-6-1904, in "Chapter 13: The Outbreak of the Herero Rising and the Humanity of the Herero," of Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918) 56.

⁵⁹ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 138.

⁶⁰ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 139.

⁶¹ Gewald, "The Great General of the Kaiser," 69.

⁶² Gewald, "The Great General of the Kaiser," 69.

⁶³ Richard Weikart, "Progress Through Racial Extermination," *German Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (May 2003): 283.

⁶⁴ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 197.

Southwest Africa, no one, not even Governor Leutwein, had expressed a desire to see the Herero exterminated. In fact the majority of colonists agreed with Governor Leutwein that the Herero should be defeated but retained as slaves.⁶⁵ However, Von Trotha did not answer to Leutwein or the German colonial office in Berlin, he was accountable only to Kaiser Wilhelm II and the Chiefs of the German General Staff.⁶⁶ Their approval of Von Trotha's violent campaign was made clear by the Kaiser, who thanked him for his suppression of the Herero uprising.⁶⁷ In short, the racist pseudo-science which motivated European colonialism was given new vitality by the arrival of Von Trotha, who would now bring the "great racial struggle" to its conclusion.

On August 4th 1904, Von Trotha and 6000 *Schutztruppe*, supported by artillery and Maxim machine guns, surrounded the Herero encampment at the Waterberg plateau. For Von Trotha this was intended to be the knockout blow, as nearly all of the 40,000 Herero who joined Samuel Maharero in rebellion were encamped there.⁶⁸ Rather than preparing for an attack, the Herero had retired to the Waterberg in preparation for efforts to negotiate with the Germans for peace.⁶⁹ Instead of peace the Herero awoke on the morning of August 11th 1904 to the sound of artillery fire, which continued to pound their huts even after the Herero army took to the field.⁷⁰ As a result, innocent Herero women and children were blown apart.⁷¹ When the Herero nearly overran the German artillery positions the Maxim machineguns were brought forward, forcing Maharero to order the retreat to the Omaheke desert.⁷² It was at this point that Von Trotha

⁶⁵ Theodor Leutwein, "Chapter 13: The Outbreak of the Herero Rising and the Humanity of the Herero," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918) 56.

⁶⁶ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 139.

⁶⁷ Gewald, "The Great General of the Kaiser," 71.

⁶⁸ Namibia101.com: "Battle of the Waterberg," 5.

⁶⁹ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 143.

⁷⁰ Namibia101.com "Battle of the Waterberg, 11 August 1904," 7.

⁷¹ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 145.

⁷² "Battle of the Waterberg," 6.

initiated policies which were new to European colonialism, and which would pave the way for the future atrocities of WWII.

As the Herero retreated into the Omaheke desert, Von Trotha ordered the *Schutztruppe* to block all exits, and sent others into the desert to prevent the Herero from accessing waterholes.⁷³ This ensured that the Herero, who were forced to flee into the Omaheke without any provisions, would soon succumb to dehydration. When the *Schutztruppe* came across the Herero men, women and children lying near death, they were instructed by Von Trotha to finish them off with bayonets and clubs.⁷⁴ Major Ludwig Von Estorff, who questioned the wisdom of massacring the Herero, asked Von Trotha if it wouldn't be better to take captives.⁷⁵ Von Trotha reiterated his assertion that no Herero could be allowed to survive due to the threat it posed to the German settlers.⁷⁶

After weeks hiding in the Omaheke some Herero began walking into German camps in an attempt to surrender. The *Schutztruppe* welcomed them into their encampments, and then shot them down. Gerard Omaheke recounts how he and several other Herero fighters were shot after surrendering, and that it was only by lying under the corpses of his fellow Herero that his life was spared.⁷⁷ Other incidents included the shooting of Herero men as they were ordered back into the Omaheke, as Manuel Timbu, a Rehoboth guide for the Germans recounts.⁷⁸ These brutal tactics occurred after the Herero had been defeated and were attempting to flee to safety in British Beuchanaland. However, Von Trotha relied on the theories of Social Darwinists and

⁷³ Gewalt, "The Great General of the Kaiser," 70.

⁷⁴ Manuel Timbu, "Chapter 15: How the Herero Were Exterminated," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918): 63.

⁷⁵ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 170-171.

⁷⁶ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 171.

⁷⁷ Gerard Kamaheke, "Chapter 15: How the Herero Were Exterminated," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918), 71.

⁷⁸ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 164.

Eugenicists to reason that anyone who challenged the German *Volk* could be exterminated.⁷⁹

Von Trotha was not alone in conceptualizing the Herero rebellion as a racial struggle for survival. The soldiers who guarded the Omaheke desert, and pursued the Herero looked at the war as a “struggle between life and death.”⁸⁰ Manuel Timbu’s account of his refusal to stab an emaciated Herero woman to death is but one example of how “the racial struggle” would be fought. Upon Timbu’s refusal, a German soldier grabbed the Herero woman and pulled her into his bayonet, and then thrust the blade into Timbu’s face, saying that this was the only way to deal with Africans.⁸¹ Even worse acts of barbarism were committed by the *Schutztruppe*, as Jan Cloetz recounts how the Germans, laughing as they did so, threw a Herero infant around like a ball, before tossing it on a bayonet.⁸² By January 1905 the violence perpetrated against the Herero had reached its apex, as Von Trotha and his superiors justified terrorism and brutality as a means of ensuring German survival.⁸³

Von Trotha’s terroristic and inhumane tactics were firmly spelled out in his October 2nd 1904 extermination order. Von Trotha argued that the Herero were no longer German subjects, and asserted that every Herero within German borders would be killed on sight.⁸⁴ Under this order, any German soldiers who brought in Herero chiefs for execution would receive 1,000 marks, with 5,000 being offered for Samuel Maharero.⁸⁵ One month later Count Christoph Ludwig Franz Otto Stillfried conducted a study of the Herero campaign, which culminated in

⁷⁹ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 206.

⁸⁰ Tilman Dederich, “The German-Herero War of 1904: Revisionism of Genocide or Imaginary Historiography?,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Special Issue: Namibia: Africa’s Youngest Nation (Mar., 1993), 84.

⁸¹ Manuel Timbu, “Chapter 15: How the Herero Were Exterminated,” in Lieutenant Thomas O’Reilly’s *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918), 63.

⁸² Jan Cloete, “Chapter 15: How the Herero Were Exterminated,” in Lieutenant Thomas O’Reilly’s *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918), 64-65.

⁸³ Gewalt, “The Great General of the Kaiser,” 72.

⁸⁴ Lothar Von Trotha, *Extermination Order*, Oct. 2nd 1904, 1.

⁸⁵ Von Trotha, *Extermination Order*, 1.

The Stillfried Report. Count Stillfried argued that the Herero should be rounded up and placed in concentration camps, where they would be used as slaves for colonial works projects.⁸⁶ The *Stillfried Report* came at an opportune time for Von Trotha, as the Social Democrats had begun calling for his removal in December 1904.⁸⁷ In response to this pressure Wilhelm II ordered Von Trotha back to Germany, and sent Friedrich Von Lindequist to Southwest Africa as its first non-military governor. Under Lindequist the recommendation of the *Stillfried Report* would be enacted, and Von Trotha's exterminatory policies continued, as the surviving Herero were ushered into concentration camps.

The Herero at the Swakopmund concentration camp were forced to work on the Luderitz to Aus railroad under brutal conditions, with women being forced to pull heavy wooden carts along the rail lines like oxen.⁸⁸ At each of the prisons the maximum ration allowance was a meager 500 grams of rice or flour per day, with women and children often receiving less than 250 grams.⁸⁹ From November 1905 to April 1907 the Herero were forced to live in the unsanitary concentration camps, where both disease and the elements caused massive mortality. Samuel Kariko, who was interred at the Shark Island concentration camp outside of Windhoek, stated that the Herero were left to lie in their filth, and whenever food was brought in they would almost trample one another to get to it.⁹⁰ The dead were often left for days within the prison, and when finally moved they were thrown into Luderitz Bay for the sharks to devour.⁹¹

By the end of 1905 only 15,000 Herero out of a former nation of 80,000 remained alive.⁹²

⁸⁶ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 160.

⁸⁷ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 173.

⁸⁸ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 167.

⁸⁹ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 165.

⁹⁰ Samuel Kariko, "Chapter 20: The Treatment of the Hottentots in War, and of the Herero and Hottentots After Surrender," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918), 101.

⁹¹ Samuel Kariko, "The Treatment of the Hottentots in War," 101.

⁹² Weikart, "Progress Through Racial Extermination," 279.

Only Swakopmund's concentration camp kept any records of the death toll, noting that forty percent of the Herero were dead within four months of their incarceration.⁹³ From 1907 until 1915, when the British seized Southwest Africa, the Herero's impoverishment forced them to return to servile labor. Governor Lindequist's proclamation, which was read to the Herero in December 1905, noted that they were the sole cause of the rebellion, and now had to serve the German settlers if they wished to remain in the colony.⁹⁴ In short, the concentration camps were closed to silence the objections of the Social Democrats, and to ensure that enough Herero remained alive to be a servile labor force. Even after the concentration camps closed, and knowledge of their diminished numbers came to light, the German colonists continued to mistreat and murder the Herero for trifling offenses.⁹⁵ For the Germans enslaving and brutalizing the Herero was not antithetical to their labor needs. The Herero defeat in the "great evolutionary struggle" for survival proved that they were destined for extinction, and thus their deaths through forced labor or brutal punishment were considered a positive good for human evolution.⁹⁶

III: The Legacy of German Southwest Africa

"The exercise of violence with crass terrorism and even with gruesomeness, was and is my politic. I destroy the African tribes with streams of blood and streams of money. Only following this cleansing can something new emerge which will remain."- Franz Von Trotha.⁹⁷

With the end of WWI on November 11th 1918 the victorious allies took Germany's colonies. Using German records at Windhoek, the Southwest African capital, the British had

⁹³ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 167.

⁹⁴ Frederich Lindequist, "Chapter 20: The Treatment of the Hottentots in War, and of the Herero and the Hottentots After Surrender," in Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly's *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918), 103.

⁹⁵ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 263.

⁹⁶ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 173.

⁹⁷ Gewalt, "The Great General of the Kaiser," 70.

begun to compile evidence on German brutality in Southwest Africa as early as 1917.⁹⁸ The British seizure of Southwest Africa in 1915, and the copious records kept by the colonial government, aided Lieutenant O'Reilly in his preparations of this "blue book" which legitimized the British seizure of Germany's colonies. While condemning the Germans for their mistreatment of the Herero, O'Reilly reasoned that German brutality represented their failure to rule benevolently over an inferior race, rather than a violation of the basic humanity of the Herero.⁹⁹ In short, Germany's failure to live up to the European paternalist conception of colonialism meant they should not have colonies. From this standpoint, the systemic abuses that Imperial Germany perpetrated against the Herero were wrong less because they were savage and more because their intent differed from the other colonial powers. Nor was there any attention paid to the role that Social Darwinism and Eugenics played in perpetuating Imperial Germany's policies in Southwest Africa.

The Allies' silence to what inspired Germany's response to the Herero rests in the general acceptance of racist pseudo-science in the early twentieth century. The British, French, Italians, and Belgians had all responded with brutality to African rebellions, and looked at their colonial charges as a source of labor and little else.¹⁰⁰ Only when it was advantageous to Britain and her allies did condemnations begin to pour in, and only as a means to discredit Germany as a colonial power. To acknowledge that Imperial Germany emulated the example of their colonial adversaries would cast doubt on the justice of European colonialism, and its purpose: the rule of the racially superior over the inferior. Britain's failure to condemn the inspiration of Germany's actions, the Social Darwinian notion of "the survival of the fittest" ensured the survival of an

⁹⁸ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 260.

⁹⁹ Lieutenant Thomas O'Reilly, "Preface," *Report On the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (Windhoek: Southwest Africa, Jan. 1918), 4.

¹⁰⁰ Pogge, "Bismarck's Colonial Policy," 202.

ideology which based the worth of an individual on their capacity to labor in service of the greater good: the evolutionary progress and dominion of the racially superior.¹⁰¹

Neither the British nor Americans mentioned the fact that Britain had viewed the Herero genocide in silence, and even offered support by offering records of their own campaign against the Boers.¹⁰² London and the Colonial press offices accounts of the horror being inflicted on the Herero lacked the emotional appeal and inflammatory rhetoric of accounts during WWI.¹⁰³ The August 23rd edition of the *Wanganui Herald* noted that British authorities had disarmed Samuel Maharero and other Herero who fled to Beuchanaland, and that 720 of the 1000 Herero held at the Swakopmund Concentration Camp had died.¹⁰⁴ Once WWI began moral outrage came to the fore, with the July 15th 1916 edition of the *Fielding Star* condemning Imperial Germany for reducing the Herero population.¹⁰⁵ This ignored the fact that over 32,000 prisoners had died in British concentration camps during the Second Boer War.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the assertion that German settlers received proper punishment for murdering the Herero is also erroneous. Rather than the three year sentences previously administered, now the German colonists received a maximum of five years imprisonment.¹⁰⁷ In short, Britain asserts its moral superiority over Germany by the fact that it granted murderers slightly longer prison sentences.

It was equally erroneous for the United States to deplore German tactics, given the fact that exterminatory wars and policies had been waged against Native Americans since the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁸ The Pequot War was one of the first instances of “race war” in Anglo-

¹⁰¹ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 194.

¹⁰² Lidner, “German Colonialism and the British Neighbor,” 258.

¹⁰³ “The Herero Rebellion,” *Wanganui Herald* Vol. 39 Issue 11644, August 23rd 1905: pg. 5

¹⁰⁴ *Wanganui Herald*, “Herero Rebellion,” 5.

¹⁰⁵ “German Barbarity in Southwest Africa,” *Fielding Star*, Vol. XII, Issue 2993, July 15th 1916: 1.

¹⁰⁶ Stanford University, “Concentration Camps During the South African/Boer War 1899-1902,” 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Fielding Star*, “German Barbarity in Southwest Africa,”: 1.

¹⁰⁸ Michael Freeman, “Puritans and Pequots: The Question of Genocide,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 68 No. 2 (June 1995): 287.

American history, as the Massachusetts colonists massacred Pequot men, women and children in what became an exterminatory campaign.¹⁰⁹ The fact that the Allies used similarly deplorable tactics, and adhered to the tenets of Social Darwinism, indicates that their condemnation of Germany, while in essence accurate, is hypocrisy. Still, in spite of their inherent bias, the records that they use clearly indicate that the *Schutztruppe* articulated and followed a policy of extermination. Moreover, the tenets which made Southwest Africa possible, racist pseudo-science, found an unparalleled acceptance among the German monarchy, intelligentsia, and crown.¹¹⁰

The ideology of racial struggle that animated Germany's Imperial rulers and intellectuals did not disappear in the postwar years. Instead, Social Darwinism, eugenics, and race science became the font from which right wing reactionaries drew strength. The Freikorps was composed of discharged German soldiers and led by men who had participated in the Herero Genocide. Ludwig Von Maercker, Franz Ritter Von Epp, and Herman Ehrhardt had all served in Southwest Africa, and participated in the systemic murder of the Herero.¹¹¹ Serving under these men were future leaders of the Nazi party, including Rudolf Hess, Martin Boorman, Reinhard Heydrich, and Heinrich Himmler.¹¹² Relying on the violent ideology preached by intellectuals like Ernst Haeckel and August Forel, and the theory of the Volk, the future Nazis perfected a violently racist ideology first enacted on the colonial stage. This ideology would lead to the horrors of the Holocaust, and the systemic murder and abuse of millions of Eastern Europeans, deemed racially inferior by Hitler's Third Reich.

Despite the influence of Social Darwinian thought among the German intelligentsia and

¹⁰⁹ Freeman, "Puritans and Pequots," 279.

¹¹⁰ Weikart, *From Darwin To Hitler*, 13.

¹¹¹ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 286.

¹¹² Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 289.

their future Nazi disciples, there were voices of opposition. While the Herero were dying in concentration camps, Social Democrats like August Bebel argued that the *Schutztruppe*'s violent reaction was predicated on false reports of Herero brutality that were designed to rob them of their basic humanity.¹¹³ In response, his conservative opponents in the Reichstag accused August Bebel of being a "nigger lover."¹¹⁴ Slightly less confrontational, Dr. Arendt argued that the cause of the rebellion was secondary to removing the threat posed by the Herero to the German colonists.¹¹⁵ The Social Democrats opposition to the treatment of the Herero was not a popular opinion among conservative circles in the government because it attempted to depict African lives as equal with those of their German overlords.

Once the Weimar Republic fell there was no longer any dissent, and Hitler was free to use his war machine to create a new world for the Aryan "master race." During the Nuremberg trials in November 1945, the military tribunal used the Holocaust and Nazi tyranny in Eastern Europe to charge the surviving leadership with crimes against humanity. Nowhere in the court's records was the Herero genocide mentioned, even though the *Schutztruppe*, like Himmler's S.S., were instructed to liquidate an entire ethnic group. As a result, the Herero Genocide became a largely forgotten episode in the long history of colonial abuses, rather than also being properly viewed as the training ground for the ideas and policies of the Third Reich.

Political amnesia became historical amnesia as exemplified by scholars like Hannah Arendt, who sought to separate the Herero genocide from the Holocaust and Nazi policies in Eastern Europe. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt reasoned that the Herero were a military threat to the German colonists, while Jews and Eastern Europeans were slaughtered on

¹¹³ "Germans Beaten Off: Herero Inflict Heaviest Losses of Campaign, War Discussed in Reichstag," *Washington Post*, March 20th 1904: 3.

¹¹⁴ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 342.

¹¹⁵ "Germans Beaten Off," *The Washington Post*, 3.

the basis of an unprovoked racist ideology.¹¹⁶ This ignores the fact that Hitler believed that Jews and Slavs were not only racially inferior, but a threat to the evolutionary progress of Germans.¹¹⁷ Birthe Kundrus expresses his disdain for connecting the Herero genocide to Nazi policy because it perpetuates the myth that genocidal activities were unique to Germany.¹¹⁸

While this is certainly a valid fear, Kundrus is wrong to argue that doing so casts Germany as an aberration in European colonialism. Britain, France, Spain, Italy, and the United States also pursued genocidal or near genocidal policies, and these are also part of the history of colonialism. However, denying the connection between the Herero and Nazi policy in WWII ignores the fact that the Third Reich was inspired by Imperial German policy, and by consequence, other colonial powers. When Hitler looked to Eastern Europe he referred to the American West, and the massacre of Native Americans, as a model for emulation.¹¹⁹ While it is undoubtedly uncomfortable to compare the Allied powers to the Nazis, this should not prevent comparisons from being made when they are warranted. Only through recognizing what created horrors like the Herero genocide and Nazism can humanity progress beyond the ideology that inspires genocide, which includes racist pseudo-science and the debasement of socio-cultural differences.

Karla Poewe is another scholar whose discomfort with connecting colonialism and Nazism causes her to arrive at inaccurate conclusions. Poewe asserts that Von Trotha's extermination order was a tool of psychological warfare, therefore its theoretical basis precludes

¹¹⁶ Dirk A. Moses, "Hannah Arendt, Imperialisms, and the Holocaust," in *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, Edited by Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 79.

¹¹⁷ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 227.

¹¹⁸ Birthe Kundrus, "From The Herero to the Holocaust: Some Remarks on the Current Debate," *Africa Spectrum* Vol. 40, No. 2 (2005): 301.

¹¹⁹ Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler*, 225.

the possibility of continuity between the Herero and Nazi policies in Eastern Europe.¹²⁰ This ignores abundant evidence that Von Trotha not only demanded the extermination of the Herero, but that he actively encouraged his soldiers to slaughter them. Moreover, Von Trotha's orders were based on the same racist pseudo-science that inspired Hitler to dehumanize Eastern Europeans.¹²¹

In conclusion, the genocidal policies perpetrated against the Herero in German Southwest Africa marked a newfound level of violence and barbarism in the history of colonialism. Relying on the tenets of prominent racial-scientists like Ernst Haeckel, August Forel, and Wilhelm Schallmayer, Imperial Germany removed the Judeo-Christian moralistic assertions of their colonial competitors and cast the Herero as sub-humans destined only for labor or extinction. The European and American opposition to the Herero genocide was only designed to justify depriving Germany of her colonies, not a condemnation of the atrocities committed. The failure to cast these abuses as intolerable reflected the American and European desire to protect their paternalistic model of colonialism, which still retained the pseudo-scientific belief in the inferiority of non-Europeans.

This intentional amnesia allowed Hitler and the Nazis to rise to power using the same racist pseudo-science that animated Imperial Germany, and to a lesser extent, the other Imperial powers. Only with the Holocaust and the decimation of Europe did the Allied powers recognize that Social Darwinism and Eugenics created intolerable human rights abuses. Yet even while recognizing the role of racist pseudo-science in the horrors of genocide, the precursor to Nazi policy, the Herero genocide, was forgotten, and cast aside as a separate issue in colonial history.

¹²⁰ Kristin Kopp, "The Case For A Colonial Poland," in *German Colonialism: Race, The Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, Edited by Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama: 149.

¹²¹ Kopp, "Colonial Poland," 155.

To recognize the connection between the Herero genocide and the Third Reich would cast aspersions on the other former colonial powers, as they pursued similarly brutal tactics. While no atrocity is comparable to those of the Nazis, to deny that there are similarities between Imperial and Nazi Germany's policies, as well as those of the other imperial powers, creates a distorted picture which could allow future human rights abuses to occur.

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