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The first Holocaust: Horrifying secrets of Germany's earliest genocide inside Africa's 'Forbidden Zone'

By SEAN THOMAS

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This must be the most God-forsaken place on Earth. I'm standing on a dusty desert road in a desolate country on the south-west coast of Africa.

In front of me is an unspoken border. Summoning the courage, I prepare to step across.

For the past 100 years, this simple act would have got me arrested, beaten or shot.



Emaciated and close to death: Some of the few Herero who escaped the 1907 genocide

Because the region I am about to enter is the Sperrgebiet, or the 'Forbidden Zone' - a place whose savage emptiness conceals the terrible secrets of a Nazi past, adorned with the tainted beauty of blood diamonds.

I pause. A Lanner falcon wheels above me in the silence of the African wilderness. Then I walk into the unknown.

This is a 20,000sq km region of south-west [Namibia](#). It has been closed to travellers since the 1900s to protect the diamond industry from smugglers. For that reason, the region is known as Diamond Zone 1, along with its Afrikaans name Sperrgebiet.

The paranoia of the government is understandable: diamonds mined in this corner of Namibia provide 80 per cent of the nation's tax income.

The paranoia has been rigorously enforced. In the past, tourists who have wandered in have been shot and killed by trigger-happy guards.

And yet, yesterday the Sperrgebiet officially became the newest and perhaps most amazing National Park in the world, though it will be years before a proper infrastructure is developed, and decades - if ever - before it receives many visitors. It will always be remote.



German imperialist Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha was in charge of putting down the local rebellion

Why is the Sperrgebiet so extraordinary? Two reasons: ecology and history - and they are cruelly intertwined.

The ecology is easily described - because of its forbidden status, this is one of the most unspoilt tracts of land in the wildest continent on Earth.

Much of it is a 'succulent desert', where the bare, hot rocks are watered by dense fogs drifting over from the icy South Atlantic.

And that fog gives rise to many oddities of nature. Right in front of me, the beach is littered with the corpses of gelatinous scarlet aliens; or rather, that's what they resemble. In fact, they are huge Namibian sea-nettles, one of the world's biggest jellyfish.

Similarly bizarre insects, plants and reptiles all thrive in the harsh environment: mis-shapen cactuses that feed off the sea-mist, trees so poisonous that even the smoke from the burning wood can kill you.

Then there are the real stars: the Wild Horses of the Namib - remarkable equines that wander between the dreamy mountains that rise with eerie abruptness from the Sperrgebiet's yellow dust.

As I travel inland I spot my first horse - thin and solitary and loping across the dirt road. Then I see more - dozens, then hundreds.

Curvetting and playing in the sandy heat-haze, they look like the ghosts of horses roaming free in the afterlife. It is a strangely haunting sight.

No one is sure how these horses arrived here. Some think they were released by the eccentric German 'Baron', Heinrich von Wolf, in 1907, from the thoroughbred stables he kept at his bizarre fortress of Duwisib (a pastiche Baroque castle, built at enormous expense in the nearby Naukluft Desert).

Another suggestion is that they were horses that escaped from British Army shipwrecks on the Skeleton Coast - the boats foundered, but the horses swam ashore.

The most likely idea is that they are the last remnants of the Schutztruppe - the German colonial army, once supreme over south-west Africa - which was defeated by the South African forces of the British Empire in 1915.

Now they are the only wild desert horses in the world, slowly evolving into a new species specially adapted to dryness.



Central figure Lothar von Trotha with members of his German colonial forces in Keetmanshoop during the Herero uprising of 1904

Reluctantly, I turn myself away from the mesmerising sight of these animals and head south. Several hours of bumpy driving along dirt roads (many of them deliberately unmarked on maps, some of them almost lost to the ceaselessly drifting sands) brings me to the gates of Oranjemund, at the mouth of the Orange River, which divides Namibia from South Africa.

It is here that the dark heart of this benighted land is to be found.

Oranjemund is probably the most restricted city in the free world: only those in the diamond trade are allowed in. This in turn means its population is 99 per cent male.

I'd like to cross the barriers and see this peculiar unisex city for myself, but the generosity of the Namibian government goes only so far.

The Sperrgebiet may be slowly opening to the public, but Oranjemund stays prohibited. And it will remain so for the foreseeable future to protect the 1.3 million carats of diamonds unearthed here annually.



Auschwitz death camp in Poland - scene of some of the worst of Nazi brutality in World War Two

Everything that goes in and out of this city is minutely examined. Any equipment that comes into Oranjemund never leaves. Ever.

Anyone quitting town is processed through steel cages, where their orifices are explored for hidden gems. Finally, everyone is X-rayed. Oranjemunders have to carry their radiological records with them to ensure they aren't overdosed with rays.

The restrictions are many. If you pick up litter in Oranjemund, you risk arrest because you might be picking up a diamond.

Simple possession of a rough diamond means 15 years in prison.



Much of Namibia is covered in stunning desert

Pigeons are banned, as they have been used in the past to smuggle gemstones. In the Nineties, one miner found a carrier

pigeon wearing a coat sewn with 120 diamonds. Knowing that if he got caught he'd get life in a Namibian jail, he turned in the hapless bird, and earned a hefty bonus.

Perhaps the grim-faced armed guards have learned a few tricks from their German forebears, because it's here in the diamond cities of the desert where the history of Namibia collides very brutally with the history of German imperialism and the sinister antecedents of the Nazis.

In a way, Namibia exists because of German interest in diamonds. In the early 1900s, geologists began exploring the area's lonely wastes for mineral wealth, including diamonds.

Previously, in terms of white settlement, this desolate territory had been thought suitable only for cattle farmers, and maybe guano merchants.

The German overlords of Namibia, who had half-heartedly acquired the colony in the 1880s, otherwise showed little interest.

But gemstones were a different matter - to protect the potentially lucrative business, the Kaiser sent out his elite colonial forces. The problem was that these forces were led by men who had two ways of dealing with difficulties: violence or, failing that, extreme violence.

To see the evidence for this, I must backtrack up the coast of the Sperrgebiet, to Luderitz.

This seaport, with its lofty Lutheran churches and its gingerbread Bavarian houses standing stark against the dust of the encroaching desert, has a surreal charm. It is surrounded by intriguing colonial ghost-towns slowly drowning under lemon-yellow dunes.



The imposing Skeleton Coast is popular with tourists

But dig a little deeper and the charm dwindles. At the far end of Luderitz harbour is a small promontory called Shark Island. It was once a real island, but was recently attached to Luderitz by a causeway.

In 1905, Shark Island became the world's first extermination camp when the German colonial forces, enraged by tribal rebellions, turned on the local Witbooi people. Many Witbooi were killed in the colonial war. Those that remained were herded on to tiny, inhospitable Shark Island.

The Germans sent them there to die. The tactic worked: countless hundreds perished, and the Witbooi were wiped from the face of the Earth.



Modern Namibia is a land of natural beauty and wildlife

That was bad enough. But this was merely a precursor to a second, much larger German-Namibian holocaust.

In the mid-1900s the Herero people of northern Namibia rebelled, massacring dozens of German settlers.

The Germans saw this revolt as a serious threat to the potential of their diamond-rich colony, so they despatched a ruthless Prussian imperialist, Lothar von Trotha, to deal with the uprising.

The Kaiser's explicit instructions to his upper-class viceroy were to 'emulate the Huns' in savagery.

Von Trotha didn't need encouraging. His intentions were quite plain. 'I know enough tribes in Africa,' he boasted. 'They are all alike insofar as they only yield to violence. My policy was, and is, to exercise this violence with blatant terrorism and cruelty.'

He was as good as his word. After several battles, where the Herero were slain in their multitudes, von Trotha decided to finish the job once and for all by destroying the entire Herero people. In 1907 he issued his notorious extermination order, or *ernichtungsbefehl*.

'I, the great general of the German soldiers, send this letter to the Herero . . . the Herero are no longer German subjects. . . they must leave the country. If they do not leave I will force them out with the big gun.

'All Herero, armed or unarmed, will be shot dead. I will no longer accept women or children, they will be forced out or they will also be shot.

These are my words to the Herero.' The Herero were driven west, into the Kalahari desert, to expire.

Guards were stationed at waterholes so the people couldn't drink; many wells were deliberately poisoned.

In the searing heat of the desert, denied water and food, the Herero didn't last long. Some women and children tried to return, but they were immediately shot.

Accounts of the holocaust are unbearably harrowing. Witnesses reported hundreds of people just lying in the desert, dying of thirst.

Children went mad among the corpses of their parents; the buzzing of the flies was deafening. Paralysed people were eaten alive by leopards and jackals.

The end was swift; the 'thirstland' of the Kalahari had taken its toll. The official German Imperial report into this colonial 'war' concluded with sickening eloquence: 'The death rattle of the dying and the furious screams of madness . . . faded away in the sublime silence of infinitude.'

Reliable historians estimate that 60,000 died in this appalling crime, constituting 70 to 80 per cent of the entire Herero people. The genocide affects Namibia's demography and politics to this day.

Was this hideous crime a 'rehearsal' for the Nazi Holocaust?

We can never know. What we do know is the name of the German official in charge of Namibian government during this time. It was Heinrich Goering - the father of Hitler's most loyal Reichsmarshall. This is undeniably disturbing. But it should be noted that the German state is now one of the biggest aid donors to Namibia.

And the family of Lothar von Trotha has grovellingly apologised to the Namibian people. Today, German tourists are the most frequent Western visitors to the country. German is widely spoken in the cities.

Germans are also expected to be the main tourists at the newly opened Sperrgebiet National Park.

Nowhere on Earth can there be a more paradoxical place. The Sperrgebiet is wildly beautiful, yet its pristine beauty exists only because the Germans established the Forbidden Zone in 1908, following the first real diamond rush.

The greed and violence surrounding the diamond trade has led to the deaths of many thousands and the terrible suffering of many more.

If the Namibian authorities are looking for a symbol for their remarkable new park, with its troubling history, they could do worse than those strange wild horses wandering gaunt and alone through the endless, hazy deserts, like the ghosts of a long-lost cavalry.

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The word "Sperrgebiet" is a German word- not an Afrikaans word!!

- Elske Tomas, Netherlands, 07/2/2009 10:09

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The treatment of the Herero is a well-known event in history. It was tragic and horrible.

- Jenny, London, 07/2/2009 10:05

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I have read how Britain , had the first concentration camps in Africa.They had burnt the Boer farms ,rounded up women& children & starved them till death in these ,Please read other countries history books before deciding who are the real vllains.If you think our leaders are civilised, think again

- Frederick Hollis, Westcliff-on-Sea, 07/2/2009 10:00

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another tragic episode in Africas history.....the way the people of that country have been treated in history and even today is diabolical.

- vanessa clarke, Tottenham, London, 07/2/2009 09:57

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Quote:"For that reason, the region is known as Diamond Zone 1, along with its Afrikaans name Sperrgebiet. "

Sorry, but the word "Sperrgebiet" is German, not Afrikaans.

Let's all hope that its pristine beauty is not spoiled like so many other "National Parks", where mass tourism has virtually destroyed the natural beauty.

- Robert Murphy, Lüderitzbucht, Namibia, 07/2/2009 09:00

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Apalling.I have nothing against the average German person but politically,Germany is always trying to displace people and expand.It is a relatively young European country and largely land locked.It's expansionist ambitions seemed to rise at the time that other colonial powers were winding down theirs and Germany,along with France have always seemed to be the most vociferous and expansionist peoples in the "New European empire" that we call the EU..

- Frank Booth, UK, 07/2/2009 08:50

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