of Herero from slipping westwards, back into the colony where they could find water and food.

Dehydration was the biggest killer. Herero who had been able to slip cattle through the gap in the German lines quenched their thirst by drinking cows' blood, leaving a trail of desiccated carcasses in their wake. Those without cattle bore holes, up to 30 feet deep, into the dry riverbeds of the Omaheke. When a little water appeared at the bottom, panic ensued. In the rush to drink, people were crushed, even buried alive, when the walls of these improvised wells collapsed. Katherine Zeraua, a survivor of what was later called 'the trail of tears', narrated her experiences to a German missionary:

> Like thousands of others, she had fled into the desert. She had lost track of her family members and was accompanied by three orphaned children. Now the misery began. There was nothing to eat and the thirst was even worse . . . she walked mostly during the nights. During the days she sought shelter by rocks or by thorny bushes. In the course of their journey they kept coming upon many dead bodies. One day they spotted a bushy shelter. They ran to it in the hope of finding anything edible for the children. But what they found were only dead or dying people. They also found a familiar face from Otjimbingwe. She greeted him. Then she said, 'Come we have to push on!' He said: 'Why should I continue? What reason is there for me to live now that I have lost everything, my family, my belongings?'[35]

The German Official History of the battle of the Waterberg described von Trotha's strategy as a stunning strategic success:

> The hasty exit of the Herero to the southeast, into the waterless Omaheke, would seal his fate; the environment of his own country was to bring about his extermination in a way that no German weapon, even in a most bloody or deadly battle, ever could . . . [their] death rattle and furious cry of insanity echoed in the exhalted silence of eternity. The Herero indictment had come to an end and they had ceased to exist as an independent people.[36]

9

'Death through Exhaustion'

Early in October 1904, six weeks after the battle of the Waterberg, the men of the German 1st Field Regiment– a unit of *Schutztruppe* commanded by General von Trotha – arrived at the last known waterhole deep inside the endless expanses of the Omaheke. Von Trotha's men were exhausted, their supplies almost at an end and their horses on the brink of collapse. They were patently in no condition to venture further into a desert that had not even been properly mapped.

The waterhole where von Trotha and his men halted stood in a small clearing by the dry bed of the Eiseb River. It was known to the Herero as Osombo zoWindimbe. In 1904, it was a desolate backwater, and today Osombo zoWindimbe is so remote that very few Namibians have even heard of it. Nevertheless, it is one of the most important sites in Namibian history and arguably a place of major significance in the wider history of the twentieth century.[1]

Just after sunrise on 3 October 1904[2] von Trotha's men were woken and assembled for the daily roll-call. Once they had been brought to attention, General von Trotha appeared, with several of his most senior officers: Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, von Epp and most probably Maximilian Bayer. Turning towards his troops, the general read aloud the text of a proclamation that he had drafted the previous day. It was written in a bizarre form of pidgin that von Trotha, considering himself an expert in African affairs, believed was the appropriate language with which to intimidate the Herero:

> I, the Great General of the German troops, send this letter to the Herero . . . The Herero people must leave the land. If they do not do this I will force them with the Groot Rohr [Cannon]. Within the German borders

every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I will no longer accept women and children, I will drive them back to their people or I will let them be shot at. These are my words to the Herero people. Signed: The Great General of the Mighty Kaiser, von Trotha.[3]

At the end of his speech von Trotha turned his gaze towards thirty-five recently captured Herero, mainly old men, women and children. On the general's orders, two of their number, both men, were dragged towards a makeshift gallows where they became victims of what Captain von Epp described in his dairy as a 'theatrical hanging'.[4]

Copies of von Trotha's proclamation – translated into Otjiherero and written out on small folded pieces of paper – were attached around the necks of old men, women and children who were then driven into the desert by volleys of gunfire aimed over their heads. The Extermination Order – as the Osombo zoWindimbe proclamation has become known – was the explicit and official confirmation of the policies that most German units had followed ever since the battle of the Waterberg. It ended any pretence that the war was being fought to end the uprising. The aim of the conflict was to eradicate the Herero as an ethnic group from German South-West Africa, either by their extermination or by their wholesale expulsion from the colony. A single copy of the original Extermination Order has survived and is in the Botswana National Archives in Gaberone. It is an almost unique document: an explicit, written declaration of intent to commit genocide.

The day after issuing the Extermination Order, von Trotha wrote to the General Staff explaining the new policy to his superiors.

Since I neither can nor will come to terms with these people without express orders from His Majesty the Emperor and King, it is essential that all sections of the nation be subjected to rather stern treatment . . . My intimate knowledge of so many Central African tribes, Bantu and others, has made it abundantly clear to me that the Negroes will yield only to brute force, whereas negotiations are quite pointless . . . They will either meet their doom in the sandveld or try to cross into Bechuanaland.[5]

In the same report, von Trotha reiterated his belief that the extermination of the Herero was merely a phase in a wider racial war in Africa, a conflict he had long predicted was inevitable: 'This uprising is and remains the beginning of a racial struggle, which I foresaw as early as 1897 in my reports to the Imperial Chancellor.'[6]

The actual military plan surrounding the Extermination Order called for the abandonment of the pursuit into the Omaheke. Only one unit, Major von Estorff's, would continue to operate in the desert. The vast bulk of the army was to be distributed along the border between the Omaheke and the Waterberg itself, forming a cordon to prevent groups of Herero from returning to their former homelands. Any Herero caught on the border between the desert and Hereroland were to be shot on sight.

Von Trotha was aware from the beginning of the potential damage the Extermination Order represented to 'the good reputation that the German soldier has acquired'. In a supplementary order he stipulated that while he was in 'no doubt that as a result of this order no more male prisoners will be taken', he was equally confident that 'neither will it give rise to atrocities committed on women and children. These will surely run away after two rounds of shots have been fired over their heads.'[7] Driven back into the desert, these women and children would simply die of thirst and malnutrition or be forced out of the colony.

All units not required for the operations on the border of the Omaheke were to be sent east, back into Hereroland, to execute the second half of von Trotha's plan. Their task was to sweep across Hereroland and 'clean up the entire district of broken groups of Hereros'.

As von Trotha was well aware, there were several thousand Herero still within Hereroland. They fell into two categories. The first were escapees from the battle of the Waterberg, who had managed to avoid German patrols and move back towards their homelands. The second were Herero who had not been at the Waterberg and, in many cases, had taken no part in the rebellion. Although at least fifty thousand Herero had gathered

at the Waterberg under their Paramount Chief Samuel Maharero, there were still perhaps twenty to thirty thousand Herero who had stayed in their villages throughout the uprising. Many lived in isolated settlements in the northern and western parts of the colony, far from the areas of white settlement. Not only had some of these communities not taken part in the uprising, they may well have known very little about the war at all. Such communities spent 1904 living in their traditional villages preoccupied with the daily difficulties of keeping themselves and their cattle alive. On von Trotha's orders, these people were to be shot on sight.[8]

They proved easy targets for the German patrols. Time and again the diaries of commanders in the Patrols reveal that their attacks were focused upon ordinary Herero villages, rather than upon anything resembling a military force. This fact is borne out by the low rates of casualties (from action rather than disease) among the men of the German units.

There are very few descriptive passages in the diaries and dispatches of the soldiers involved in the German Patrol, but there are a few unguarded phrases that hint at the slaughter that took place across Hereroland in 1904 and 1905. Wilhelm Lorang, a soldier in von Epp's company, later explained that, as he understood it, the Extermination Order permitted the Germans to 'shoot, kill, hang. Whatever you liked. Old or young. Men, women, children.' According to Pastor Elger, a missionary based in the Herero town of Karibib, the motto of the Patrols became 'Clean out, hang up, shoot down till they are all gone.'[9]

From Africans working for the *Schutztruppe*, there is another set of accounts that describe in more detail the actions of the German Patrols. In late 1904 Hendrik Campbell, a member of the mixed-race Baster people from the town of Rehoboth, was in command of a contingent of Baster men compelled to fight for the Germans under the terms of their protection treaty. Campbell and his men witnessed the actions of one of the Patrols in the last weeks of 1904:

> At Katjura we had a fight with the Herero, and drove them from their position. After the fight was over, we discovered eight or nine sick Herero women who had been left behind. Some of them were blind. Water and food had been left with them. The German soldiers burnt them alive in the hut in which they were laying . . . Afterwards at Otjimbende we [the Basters] captured 70 Hereros. I handed them over to Ober-Leutenants Völkmann and Zelow. I then went on patrol, and returned two days later, to find the Hereros all lying dead in a kraal. My men reported to me that they had all been shot and bayoneted by the German soldiers.[10]

The area over which the Patrols operated was 100,000 square miles in size. Although the Germans considered the entire region 'Hereroland', it was also home to communities of Damara, Owambo and San. Most soldiers had only been in the colony a few months and could not distinguish these different African peoples. Many of those killed by the Patrols were almost certainly non-Herero. Hundreds of miles from their senior commanders, operating on the fringes of an endless desert and under orders to shoot Herero on sight, it may well have been a very small step for exhausted men to reinterpret their orders as a licence to kill all Africans.

On occasion, the Patrols were unable to reach bands of Herero in the desert and instead sent lone messengers out into the bush in the hope of luring them into ambushes with false promises. In the most famous case, a group of some three hundred Herero, who had made camp on the western perimeter of the Omaheke Desert, were located by a German patrol. On 29 October the Germans sent a messenger to the Herero camp to assure them that if they reported to the waterhole of Ombakaha, 20 miles to the east, they would be allowed to surrender and their lives would be spared.[11]

The next day, their leader Joel Kavezeri and eighty of his men set out for Ombakaha to accept the German offer. When they arrived they were offered some tobacco and – as it was noon – were permitted to sit in the shade of a tree. They then entered into negotiations with the local German commander, Lieutenant

von Beesten, who, in the middle of their conversation, suddenly ran for cover, shouting orders for his troops to open fire. One of the few survivors, Gerard Kamaheke later described what had happened:

I sat there waiting, when suddenly the Germans opened fire on us. We were nearly surrounded, and my people tried to make their escape. I tried to fight my way through, but was shot in the right shoulder and fell to the ground, and I lay quite still and pretended to be dead. I was covered with blood. The German soldiers came along bayoneting the wounded; and as I did not move they thought I was dead already and left me. The chiefs Saul and Joel and all the other headmen were killed. I got up in the night and fled back to our camp, where I found our women and children still safe and also some survivors of my 70 men. We then fled away towards the Sandveld and scattered in all directions.[12]

In the Official German History of the campaign in South-West Africa, Ombakaha is described as a battle, yet not a single German soldier was killed or wounded. In his own report, Lieutenant von Beesten noted that 'all enemy fighters were shot at distances between 10 and 300 metres' – the optimum range of the Maxim gun.[13]

Ombakaha was not an isolated event. Across Hereroland, bands of Herero were tricked into believing it was safe to return from the bush, and then killed. Such massacres encouraged the Herero to move into the more remote parts of their territory or enter the Omaheke.

Despite its brutality, it was evident as early as November 1904 that the Extermination Order and its agents were failing to ethnically cleanse South-West Africa of the Herero. Furthermore, extended operations even in the more fertile areas of Hereroland had pushed von Trotha's men to the very limit of their endurance. About half of the soldiers involved in operations against the Herero were suffering from the effects of typhoid, dehydration or chronic dysentery. On 25 October Senior Lieutenant Haak (who was to die in action a month later in one of his first active engagements) described the state of a group of *Schutztruppe* recently arrived in Windhoek from the bush:

These are the troops who have been in the field the longest. It is impossible for me to really describe their appearance and the condition of their horses as they arrived in town yesterday. The uniforms were hanging like rags off emaciated human shapes, whose faces were burnt beyond recognition, with stubbly beards and long hair; some had replaced missing boots with cloth that was wrapped from their feet to the knees. The poor horses looked pathetic.[14]

It seems that Theodor Leutwein became fully aware of the Extermination Order only some weeks after it had been proclaimed at Osombo zoWindimbe. Still nominally Governor of South-West Africa, Leutwein was horrified by von Trotha's policy, more on economic than humanitarian grounds. On 23 October he wrote to the Colonial Department informing them that Chief Salatiel Kambazembi – one of the key Herero chiefs under Samuel Maharero – had requested negotiations to end the war. Leutwein also requested formal confirmation that as civilian governor he had the authority to accept a Herero surrender.

During the tussle for power that followed, von Trotha wrote to Leutwein admitting that the battle of the Waterberg had failed to exterminate the Herero and explaining how his new policy would lead to their ultimate annihilation, no matter what obstacles Leutwein might put in his way: 'the eastern border of the colony will remain sealed off and terrorism will be employed against the Herero showing up. That nation must vanish from the face of the earth. Having failed to destroy them with guns, I will have to achieve my end in that way.'[15]

Von Trotha sought support for his extermination policy from the army, and again, the civilian branches of government were pushed aside. Leutwein effectively resigned and was given leave. After eleven years as governor, he left the colony. The military rule that von Trotha had declared on his arrival in Windhoek in June 1904 was now unchallenged.

It is a mark of the brutality of German colonialism in South-West Africa that Governor Theodor Leutwein and Major von Estorff – of whom we shall hear more later – are almost heroes in this sorry history. The *Alte Afrikaners* (Old Africans), as von Trotha called men like Erstorff and Leutwein, had few moral qualms over disinheriting Africans of their land and property. They set out systematically to undermine their social structures and adopted a culturally corrosive policy of divide and rule. But their conception of colonialism still had a role for the Africans, if only a subservient one. The gulf between the policies and attitudes of Leutwein and Erstorff, and those of Lothar von Trotha, was symptomatic of the great shift from the old paternalist racism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to the new biological racism of the twentieth century.

Although Theodor Leutwein's policies resulted in his removal from office, he had nonetheless been completely correct in concluding that von Trotha's plan to exterminate the Herero was logistically and militarily impractical. By November 1904 the appalling conditions of von Trotha's men and the impossibility of their task had become apparent to the military authorities in Berlin. On 23 November General von Schlieffen, still in overall command of the strategy of the war, wrote to Chancellor von Bülow that 'while von Trotha's intentions are commendable, he is powerless to carry them out'.[16] Chancellor von Bülow and the civilian officials of the Colonial Department did not share von Schlieffen's admiration for von Trotha's intention. In the early stages of the war von Bülow's coalition government, swept along by an overwhelming popular support for the war, had supported the generals' hard line. However, when Chancellor von Bülow received the text of the Extermination Order, he was horrified.

Von Bülow feared that Germany's international reputation, already tarnished by her actions in East Africa and China, would be further damaged should the Extermination Order become

widely known. In the same year that Germany sent von Trotha to crush the Herero, the international campaign against the horrors in the Congo Free State reached its apex. Under Leopold's regime, millions of Congolese women had been kidnapped and their men forced to collect increasingly unrealistic quotas of wild rubber. When quotas were not met or resistance offered, the mercenaries of the King's *Force Publique* had inflicted barbaric punishments and unleashed murderous raids against innocent villagers. During the autumn of 1904, the newspapers of Europe and America carried almost daily reports cataloguing the barbarity of Leopold's colony and condemning the King himself in the harshest terms. With details of the war in South-West Africa beginning to appear in the foreign press, Von Bülow feared that von Trotha's policies, in particular the Extermination Order, might be seen in the same light and had the potential to 'demolish Germany's reputation among civilised nations and indulge foreign agitation'.[17]

It is perhaps unsurprising that Kaiser Wilhelm, the man who did more to undermine Germany's reputation than any of his contemporaries, was blind to the dangers of the Extermination Order and von Trotha's brutality. Wilhelm continued to applaud von Trotha's 'vigorous action' and energy, long after the Extermination Order had become a matter of grave concern to German politicians. Untroubled by the potential scandal the Kaiser wrote to the general: 'You have entirely fulfilled my expectations when I named you commander of the colonial troops, and I take pleasure in expressing, once again, my utter gratitude for your accomplishments so far.'[18]

In late November 1904, Wilhelm was confronted by both his Chancellor, von Bülow, and his Chief of the General Staff, von Schlieffen. Von Bülow complained that German policy in South-West Africa was barbaric and potentially scandalous, while von Schlieffen considered von Trotha's strategy commendable but utterly impractical. What followed was a battle of wills between the Kaiser and von Bülow.

Von Bülow's office requested that Wilhelm rescind the Extermination Order with immediate effect. Rather than

responding, the Kaiser and his entourage left Berlin on a five-day hunting trip to his Hohenlohe estate in eastern Prussia. Only on 8 December – five days after receiving the Chancellor's request – did Wilhelm finally agree that von Trotha should also 'treat mercifully those Herero who voluntarily surrender'.[19] When von Bülow asked the Kaiser to agree to a specific text explicitly withdrawing the Extermination Order, Wilhelm took another eight days to reply. Meanwhile the killing in Hereroland continued.

When General von Trotha received the telegraph of his new orders, he was reportedly enraged and instantly offered his resignation, which was refused. In an attempt to appease him, von Schlieffen reassured von Trotha that 'His Majesty has not forbidden you to shoot the Hereros', rather that 'the possibility of showing mercy is to be restored'.

Just four days after agreeing to rescind von Trotha's Extermination Order, Kaiser Wilhelm received a report he had secretly commissioned some weeks earlier. On 10 November 1904, the Kaiser had personally instructed Count Georg von Stillfried und Rattonitz, an officer in von Trotha's army on sick leave in Germany, to report 'on his views on the native question and military conditions in South-West Africa, in the past two years'. He had not informed Chancellor von Bülow, the Reichstag or General von Schlieffen, circumventing all official channels of civilian and military authority.

Although he only held the rank of Lieutenant, Count von Stillfried was an aristocrat and as such was trusted by the Kaiser. Stillfried had first arrived in South-West Africa in 1900 and been placed in command of a small unit of troops. By all accounts, he was admired by his men and fellow officers alike. He had fought at the Waterberg, and had a genuine understanding of the colony and German operations therein. On 12 December, exactly eleven months after the start of the war, Stillfried's report – fifty-five

pages long and painstakingly handwritten in neat gothic calligraphy – was presented to the Kaiser. Stillfried recommended that in order to ensure the Herero would pose no future threat to German colonialism, 'The surviving natives have to be disarmed all and one, and anyone in possession of a rifle should be punished with death.' The chiefs, the dynasties around which the Herero nation was built, were to be eradicated, to ensure the docility of the Herero. Stillfried recommended that 'All chiefs should be executed and their families – even if they are innocent – should be deported to another colony so that they will never again gain influence among their people.'[20]

What distinguishes Stillfried's recommendations from the policies of General von Trotha is that they took into account the economic realities of the colony. Stillfried understood that the war to annihilate the Herero had generated a compelling argument for their continued survival, in the short term at least. During the conflict the demand for cheap labour had become so acute that it enormously increased the value of the Herero as an economic asset. However, the means by which Stillfried proposed the labour of the Herero be exploited was profoundly different from anything Theodor Leutwein had ever suggested. He recommended that 'All natives from the warring tribes, apart from those who work for the Government, should be leased out either in large or small numbers to private persons, farmers and merchants and so forth. Here they should perform labour for food.'[21] He went on,

> All native prisoners will have to carry a numbered identification tag made from brass and if away from their homes will be entitled to produce a pass. All natives who have been sentenced to captivity shall be placed in confined areas nearby the place where they will work. They shall be supervised by one of their compatriots but not by a chief. [The supervisor] will provide the police with a continuous flow of information.[22]

'Confined Areas' – *Geschlossenen Niederlassungen* – was the critical phrase in the Stillfried Report. It alluded to a device that had been disastrously deployed only three years earlier during

the Boer War. There the British commander-in-chief, Lord Herbert Kitchener, had forced around thirty thousand Boer women and children, and over one hundred thousand black and coloured Africans, into large enclosures of barbed wire, several layers thick. Poorly run, insanitary, and badly provisioned, these enclosures saw over twenty-five thousand Boer civilians, and perhaps as many as fourteen thousand Africans die, most from disease and the effects of malnutrition. In the British Parliament, the Liberal MPs C. P. Scott and John Ellis had condemned the practice and described the enclosures as 'concentration camps'.[23]

The military rationale for the British use of concentration camps in the Boer War had been to separate a guerrilla army from a local civilian population from whom they received sustenance and among whom they took refuge. Four years earlier, the Spanish rulers of Cuba had forced civilians into similar camps during the revolt of 1896. The concentration camp was therefore not a new concept, but the way in which Count Stillfried recommended it should be applied was entirely novel. When Kitchener had launched his clearance campaign and set up the camps, British intelligence believed that there were twenty thousand Boer guerrillas still in the field. In South-West Africa, the Herero were already a defeated and scattered people. They were not engaged in a guerrilla war and, following the battle of the Waterberg and the disintegration of Herero leadership, they had not been able to field anything resembling a military force.

Stillfried's 'confined areas' were to be both concentration camps and work camps. It was this addition of forced labour that was to make the concentration camps of German South-West Africa so disastrous for the thousands of people imprisoned within them.

A copy of the Stillfried Report, full of marginal notes written by the Kaiser, was sent to the Reich Chancellery around Christmas 1904. Stillfried's recommendations for forced labour appealed to Chancellor von Bülow and others who feared for Germany's reputation the longer the war dragged on. Work camps suggested that the Herero nation would be permitted to

survive, albeit as virtual slaves. As it was widely believed that Africans were inherently lazy, forced labour was even considered a means of moral and cultural 'upliftment'.

On 14 January 1905, the dispute over policy in South-West Africa was resolved when revised orders, incorporating many of Count Stillfried's proposals, were wired to von Trotha. The general was directly ordered to establish a number of what the orders termed *Konzentrationslager* – a literal translation of the English 'concentration camp'. Enshrining Stillfried's ideas into official policy, Chancellor von Bülow specifically stated that 'the surrendering Herero should be . . . put under guard and required to work'.[24]

The new orders were intentionally vague, so as not to preclude field executions or halt the actions of the Patrols. In the orders that von Trotha sent to his officers in the field, he made it clear that the continuation of military operations against the Herero was to take precedence over the administration of the camps or the feeding of surrendering Herero in the concentration camps.

In order to bring the Herero into the camps, the Patrols were permitted to take prisoners. However, many officers and soldiers followed General von Trotha's lead and interpreted their new orders as narrowly as possible. Several units continued to hunt and kill Herero, and Herero were still attacked while attempting to surrender. Many were lured out of hiding by the assurances of African messengers sent into the bush. Even in the face of this continued violence, thousands were induced to surrender, and as early as February 1905 it was apparent that many more Herero had been able to survive than the Germans had imagined possible. Perhaps as many as thirty thousand had lived by foraging for wild onions and roots, and hunting small game. By the end of 1904, over four months after the battle of the Waterberg, what little food there was to be found in Hereroland had been consumed. According to the Herero's own oral histories, their malnourishment was so severe that they had taken to eating scorpions. By February and

March 1905, their suffering was such that thousands began to surrender, independent of the collection patrols.[25]

They emerged like ghosts from the Omaheke and the distant corners of Hereroland. They dragged themselves into the German towns of Omaruru, Karibib, Windhoek and Okahandja. Most were women and children, and all were in an appalling state of advanced malnutrition. Pastor Elger, a missionary in Karibib, a small town in western Hereroland, described the Herero who arrived there as being 'mere skeletons covered by a thin film of skin'.[26] Unsure how to deal with the influx, most settlers stood aside and watched as malnourished Herero died on their streets. When the District Commander of Omaruru made the mistake of expressing some concern for their plight, he was compelled to apologise publicly in a newspaper and reassure the local settlers that he was not guilty of 'dizzy humanitarianism'.[27]

As early as February 1905, the Herero who had surrendered in the German towns, along with those collected directly from the bush, were loaded in open cattle-trucks or marched in human caravans by soldiers into the hastily constructed concentration camps.

There were five main camps. Each had been located in or near a site of German settlement, as it was there that the need for African labour was most pressing. The largest camp – with a capacity of seven thousand – was in the capital, Windhoek, on the steep slopes that led down from the walls of the German fortress. Two smaller camps were set up in the former Herero homelands at Karibib and Okahandja, where the Germans planned to expand their farming operations and would need a steady supply of free labour. The last two camps were established in the coastal towns of Swakopmund and Lüderitz – the colony's two ports.[28]

Most of the records, both military and civilian, for the concentration camps of German South-West Africa have been lost or

were deliberately destroyed to prevent them falling into the hands of the South Africans in 1915. However, a surprising amount of official documentation from the camp at Swakopmund has survived. Historians know relatively more about the Swakopmund camp thanks, in large part, to the work of two remarkable local figures. The first was the civilian District Commissioner for the town of Swakopmund, Dr Fuchs. An efficient and punctilious civil servant, Fuchs carried out an investigation into conditions in the camp that reveals a wealth of detail and demonstrates that knowledge of the suffering of the prisoners extended far up the chains of command, in both Windhoek and Berlin.[29] The other resident of Swakopmund whose testimony is critical is the local Rhenish Missionary, Heinrich Vedder.

Missionaries like Vedder were the only non-military personnel permitted to enter the camps. They were allowed to take Sunday services and conduct funerals. Some were even given permission to set up small hospices inside the camps, where they tended the dying and administered the last rights. They also supplied books, most commonly the Bible, and in some camps they struggled to keep up with demand.[30]

Heinrich Vedder had only recently arrived in the colony when he was given the task of setting up a mission among the prisoners in Swakopmund in early 1905. Young and energetic, Vedder became one of the most vocal of the missionaries. His letters – and the responses from missionaries working in other camps – tell us not only about the Swakopmund camp but about the whole concentration-camp system. In an entry in the *Swakopmund Missionary Chronicle* of December 1905, Vedder painted a vivid picture of the conditions in the Swakopmund camp. He tells us that the Herero

> were placed behind a double row of barbed wire . . . and housed in pathetic structures constructed out of simple sacking and planks, in such a manner that in one structure 30–50 people were forced to stay without distinction to age or sex. From early morning until late at night, on weekends as well as on Sundays and holidays, they had to work under the clubs of the raw overseers until they broke down. Added to this

food was extremely scarce. Rice without any necessary additions was not enough to support their bodies, already weakened by life in the field and used to the hot sun of the interior, from the cold and restless exertion of all their powers in the prison conditions in Swakopmund. Like cattle, hundreds were driven to death and like cattle they were buried. This opinion may seem harsh or exaggerated . . . but then I cannot suppress in these chronicles the wanton brutality, the lusty lack of morality [or] the brutish sense of supremacy that is found among the troops and civilians here. A full account is almost not possible.[31]

The appalling suffering of the Herero in the Swakopmund concentration camp was directly linked to the success of Swakopmund's economy. The town had become German South-West Africa's main port. Despite the fact that it had no natural harbour and was an extremely poor anchorage, it had overtaken Walvis Bay in both size and importance. Twice a week, a steamer from the Woermann Company arrived offshore, bringing supplies and reinforcements, along with goods and new settlers seeking refuge from Germany's overcrowded cities.

The desperate need for labour in Swakopmund was a direct consequence of its lack of a natural harbour. Unable to dock, the Woermann ocean liners were forced to anchor offshore and unload their cargoes into flat-bottomed transport boats that ferried both goods and passengers to the shore. In 1905, the inmates of the concentration camps were used to unload these transport ferries and carry the goods up to depots inland. Others were used to build an extension to a wooden jetty. Others again were formed into work gangs and made to labour on the construction of government buildings and even private residences.

The main concentration camp in Swakopmund was administered by the army and was located somewhere near the northern entrance of the town, near the coastline. A number of concentration camps came into existence, at various times. The largest of them was the military camp, which often held more than 1,000 prisoners at a time. It was located near the waterfront, where the labour of the inmates was required.[32]

Prisoners in Swakopmund, like those in the other camps across the colony, were given utterly inadequate food rations. In von Trotha's initial orders of 16 January he had specifically instructed military commanders in charge of the camps to keep rations to an absolute minimum. The *Portionsliste*, the army's ration list, placed concentration-camp prisoners just above mules and horses in order of priorities. The official camp ration was 500 grams of rice or flour per day, calculated on the presumption that prisoners of war were male. Women and children – who made up the vast majority of the camp's population – were often given half rations. As neither rice nor flour was known to the Herero, they had no knowledge of how to cook it. In many cases, the prisoners were not even provided with pots or pans with which to prepare their food. The prisoners ate these unfamiliar rations raw, unaware that uncooked they caused diarrhoea. As early as 1 March 1905, in a letter to the Mission Headquarters in Wupperthal, Missionary Vedder complained that the 'people suffer their daily meal of rice, which due to the lack of pots is very difficult to prepare . . . hundreds are breaking down due to the lack of nutrition and are dying'.[33]

In Swakopmund, as in the other coastal camp in the southern port of Lüderitz, the deleterious effects of insufficient and inappropriate food were considerably augmented by the cold maritime climate. The coastal strip of the Namib Desert has its own distinct microclimate. When the skies are clear and there are no winds, temperatures on the coast can be almost as high as those in the desert itself, but such conditions are rare. On most days a thick bank of sea-fog shrouds the coastline, blocking out the sun. Even on clear days, the warmth of the sun is often counteracted by icy winds that rush inland from the South Atlantic.

To help them acclimatise to the conditions at Swakopmund, the missionaries and the local army commanders issued some of the prisoners with second-hand clothing, but in February 1905 von Trotha personally intervened to stop this. Instead prisoners were issued with rough hessian sacks, with holes cut out for their arms and heads. These were almost entirely ineffective against

the ocean winds. The predictable result of exposing an already weakened population to malnutrition and freezing temperatures was the rapid spread of disease: influenza, dysentery and scurvy – believed by the Germans to be infectious – as well as pneumonia, smallpox, syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases. As in all the concentration camps, there was no sanitation at Swakopmund and the sick were left untended, lying for days or weeks in their own excrement. The camp quickly became infested with flies and maggots, which spread infection further.[34]

The awful decline in the health of prisoners, caused by conditions in the Swakopmund camp, was not permitted to stand in the way of their exploitation as forced labour. In all the concentration camps Herero prisoners were placed under the jurisdiction of the army's Military Supply Division, known as the *Etappenkommando*. The civilian administration was able to requisition Herero prisoners from the army free of cost. The regulations under which labour was distributed specifically stated that prisoners were to receive food 'but no payment'. Private individuals and companies were also able to hire Herero labourers from the *Etappenkommando* for a *Kopfsteuer* – 'Head Tax', of fifty pfennig per day, or ten Reichsmarks per month. All profits were siphoned directly into the coffers of the colonial government.[35]

The method by which the army kept track of the thousands of Herero in the camp system had been suggested in the Stillfried Report. In early 1905, tens of thousands of oval-shaped metal tags stamped with the Kaiser's crown were produced in Dresden and shipped out to the colony. Dissatisfied with this arrangement, von Trotha proposed that prisoners be permanently marked with their identification numbers. Whether he imagined branding or tattooing is not clear.[36]

Due to the lack of male prisoners, it was mainly women and children as young as twelve who were rented out to private individuals. Girls and younger women were in particularly high demand as domestic servants. On 29 March the colonial

government under von Trotha introduced formal regulations for the renting out of the prisoners. The local civilian administration was made responsible for collating all requests for Herero labour. These requests were then transmitted to the *Etappenkommando*.

The distribution of Herero prisoners to private settlers and soldiers became so widespread that the colonial government eventually passed an ordinance forbidding officers from taking their Herero servants home to Germany at the end of their terms of service. One of those caught flouting this regulation was Count Stillfried himself, recently promoted to the rank of captain. When Stillfried returned to South-West Africa in April 1906 he brought with him his wife and child, for whom he acquired a Herero man named Franz as a servant. When he finally came home in 1908 Stillfried attempted to 'export' Franz and, despite his rank and status, was arrested and court-martialled for the offence. In spite of overwhelming evidence against him, the Count was acquitted, his letter of acquittal signed by the Kaiser personally.[37]

The Herero recruited by private individuals as farmhands or servants were arguably more fortunate than those hired out to private companies. Each morning, the overseers employed by various German firms assembled thousands of Herero and marched them from the camps, through the streets or across deserts, to public construction sites. Women, men and sometimes children were forced to build roads, construct buildings, lay rails or stack heavy bags of food or ammunition. In Swakopmund, Herero women were formed into teams of eight and – in lieu of oxen or horses – made to pull the wagons on the narrow-gauge railway.

As surviving photographs show, at Swakopmund, the Woermann Shipping Line employed so many concentration-camp prisoners that they were permitted to open their own 'enclosure'. In this private concentration camp, the prisoners – described at times as 'stock' or 'head', as if they were cattle – lived in conditions almost identical to those in the main military camps, although there seems to have been a slightly better supply of pots to cook with.

In an affidavit submitted to the Governor of the British Cape Colony in August 1906, three coloured workers from Cape Town, who had the previous year passed through Swakopmund, described the conditions under which the female prisoners were made to labour in an indeterminant Swakopmund camp:

> These unfortunate women are daily compelled to carry heavy iron for construction work, also big stacks of compressed fodder. I have often noticed cases where women have fallen under the load and have been made to go on by being thrashed and kicked by the soldiers and conductors. The rations supplied to the women are insufficient and they are made to cook the food themselves. They are always hungry, and we, labourers from the Cape Colony, have frequently thrown food into their camp. The women in many cases are not properly clothed . . . old women are made to work and are constantly kicked and thrashed by soldiers.[38]

It is hard to determine the number of lives lost in the camps. The only camp that kept records of mortality in 1905 was the Swakopmund camp. According to their statistics approximately 40 percent of the prisoners in Swakopmund died during their first four months of captivity, and any prisoner who entered the camp was likely to be dead within ten months. And this was almost certainly an underestimation of the true death rate at Swakopmund.

A photograph smuggled out of the camp – probably in mid-1905 – shows the withered body of a young Herero boy. It is not clear if he is dead or alive. Each rib is visible and around his waist is a tightly bound leather strap worn by most prisoners, possibly to subdue the pain of hunger. Otherwise, he is naked, clutching in his right hand his only possession – a hessian sack.

It has been suggested that the extremely high mortality rates in the camps were the result of accidental neglect, disorganisation within the army or simply the ignorance of those tasked with administering the camp system.[39] However, a report written by Dr Fuchs – the civilian District Commissioner of Swakopmund – demonstrates that both the colonial administration in Windhoek and the most senior officials in the Colonial Department in

Berlin were fully aware of what took place in the camps, and chose not to act.[40]

In early 1905, two months after the opening of the camps, the missionary Heinrich Vedder brought the death rates in Swakopmund and the other concentration camps to the attention of his superiors at the Rhenish Mission's headquarters in the German town of Wupperthal. At a meeting with the Colonial Department in Berlin, the missionaries confronted officials with Vedder's reports. In response, a muted and carefully worded order for the immediate drafting of a report into conditions in the Swakopmund camp was issued by the Colonial Department. The order was sent initially to the Deputy Governor of South-West Africa, Hans Tecklenburg, who passed it on to District Commissioner Fuchs.

Dr Fuchs was given full access to the camp, and his report, although hastily written, was damning in its conclusions. According to Fuchs's calculations, around 10 percent of the entire population of the Swakopmund camp had died in the last two weeks of May 1905.[41] In his opinion, corroborated by the local government doctor, the Herero in the Swakopmund camp were dying at an alarming rate due to 'inadequate facilities'. The poor conditions were made worse by the 'raw, uncommon ocean climes and the weakened state in which they [the prisoners] arrived'.[42]

Dr Fuchs also compared the death rates of the prisoners in the concentration camp with that of a number of Damara and Owambo migrant labourers living in Swakopmund at the time and working 'in the service of the local government'. Fuchs informed his superiors that not one of them had died since he had taken command on 15 September 1903. In fact, among all groups in Swakopmund, German and African, civilian and military, and even those held in the local prison, mortality rates had remained 'constant'.

In conclusion, Dr Fuchs stated that in order to reduce the mortality rate, 'It is necessary to provide [the prisoners] with accommodation that is sheltered from the wind, properly ventilated

rooms, warm clothes (coats, trousers, blankets, shoes) and some variation in the food (rice, flour and, where possible, also some meat, onions or lard) as well as medical attention'.[43]

Fuchs's report was intended to be secret. Copies were sent only to Hans Tecklenburg in Windhoek, Oskar Stuebel, Director of the Colonial Department in Berlin, General von Trotha and Colonel Dame, the head of the *Etappenkommando*. In response, von Trotha, Tecklenburg and Dame all argued that despite the horrendous death rate, the flow of Herero prisoners to Swakopmund and the other coastal camps at Lüderitz had to continue in order to meet the pressing need for labour. Colonel Dame noted that while it might be unfortunate that women prisoners were made to work at the Swakopmund and Lüderitz camps, the need for labour was so acute that 'there is no alternative'.[44] Oskar Stuebel accepted Fuchs's claim that better food might improve conditions at Swakopmund, but then proceeded to denounce the rationale behind Fuchs's report. Not only did he fail to implement Fuchs's recommendations for better conditions, he rejected his suggestion that prisoners who were already sick should be sent inland, away from the freezing conditions at the coast.

There is even evidence that – at least in the mind of Deputy Governor Tecklenburg – the camps were intended to weed out the weak and leave only the stronger Herero. In a letter written to the Colonial Department in June 1905, Tecklenburg argued that the high death rates were in Germany's long-term interests. The concentration camps would leave the Herero culturally broken and decimated. Any Herero who survived the hardships would become the slaves of the German colonisers and they would necessarily be the strongest and fittest. He noted that,

> The more the Herero people now feel the consequences of the uprising on their own bodies, the less the coming generations will feel inclined to rebel. Sure, the death of so many natives has a negative commercial impact, but the natural life-force of the Hereros will soon allow them to recover their numbers; the future generations, which could possibly be mixed with a bit of Damara blood, would thus have been bottle-fed with [an understanding of] their inferiority to the white race.[45]

Herero Chief Tjamuaha KaMaharero and his council in the pre-colonial era.

The Bondelswarts Nama leadership photographed in 1876 in their home town of Warmbad.

A group of Nama women and children, captured by a German patrol and forced to pose for the camera.

Herero women in the Swakopmund camp used to pull railcars loaded with ammunition and provisions. The majority of prisoners in all the camps were women and children.

Wilhelm Eich, the Rhenish Missionary in Okahandja, where 1,500 Herero had been divided between three small concentration camps, claimed on 19 June 1905 that 'The overseer of Camp I [the military camp] told me recently that he was under orders only to seek out the strong for His Majesty [Wilhelm II].'[46]

The most damning evidence suggesting that the mass deaths of prisoners in the concentration camps was known of and approved by the German authorities is found in the National Archives of Namibia. In the vaults of the archives is a *Totenregister* – a death register – for the Swakopmund camp.[47] It records the deaths of some of the thousands of Herero prisoners who perished in between January 1905 and 1908. Similar *Totenregister* may have existed for the other camps but have since been lost, or were deliberately destroyed.

The pages of the Swakopmund *Totenregister* are divided into columns in which the military clerk or camp officer entered the names, genders and ages of deceased prisoners. However, officiating clerks had no need to enter details in the column indicating the 'cause of death'. That came pre-printed – 'death through exhaustion, bronchitis, heart disease or scurvy'.