

## Thought Leader

# The Blue Book: A chronicle of crimes

On 27 January, the world remembers the victims of the Holocaust, but it is also worth remembering the victims of Germany's other, earlier genocide in Namibia. A book, commissioned by Britain in the early 1900s, stands as a record of the heinous crimes against the Herero and the Nama

COMMENT  
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**W**hen Major Thomas Leslie O'Reilly received the assignment from the Union of South Africa to gather evidence of the so-called natives' "anxiety to live under British rule", most likely one of his first candidates to interview was Chief Hosea Kutako. Kutako (1870-1970), would have been about halfway through his long life when he contributed to what would become known as the *Blue Book*.

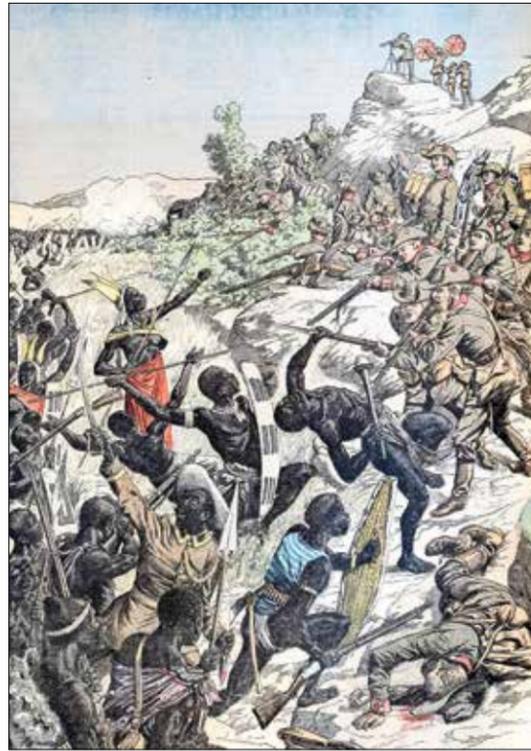
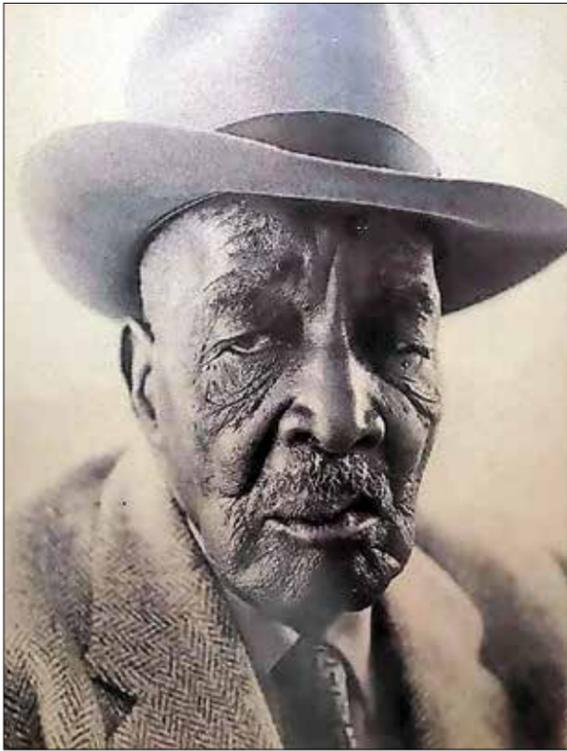
At the time of his birth, the Herero were enjoying their last era of prosperity. "It is impossible to estimate the Hereros' wealth, even approximately," writes an emissary from the British government in 1870. "The poorest families in a tribe possess something, three or four cows, a few oxen, 20 or 30 sheep," while chiefs could possess "up to 25000 head of cattle".

By the time Kutako gave evidence as one of 75 eyewitnesses of Imperial Germany's project of deliberate racial extermination from 1904-1907, 80% (about 65000 to 70000 people) of the Herero and half the Nama population (around 10000 people) had been killed, raped, and driven to death by flight into the desert, starvation and exhaustion.

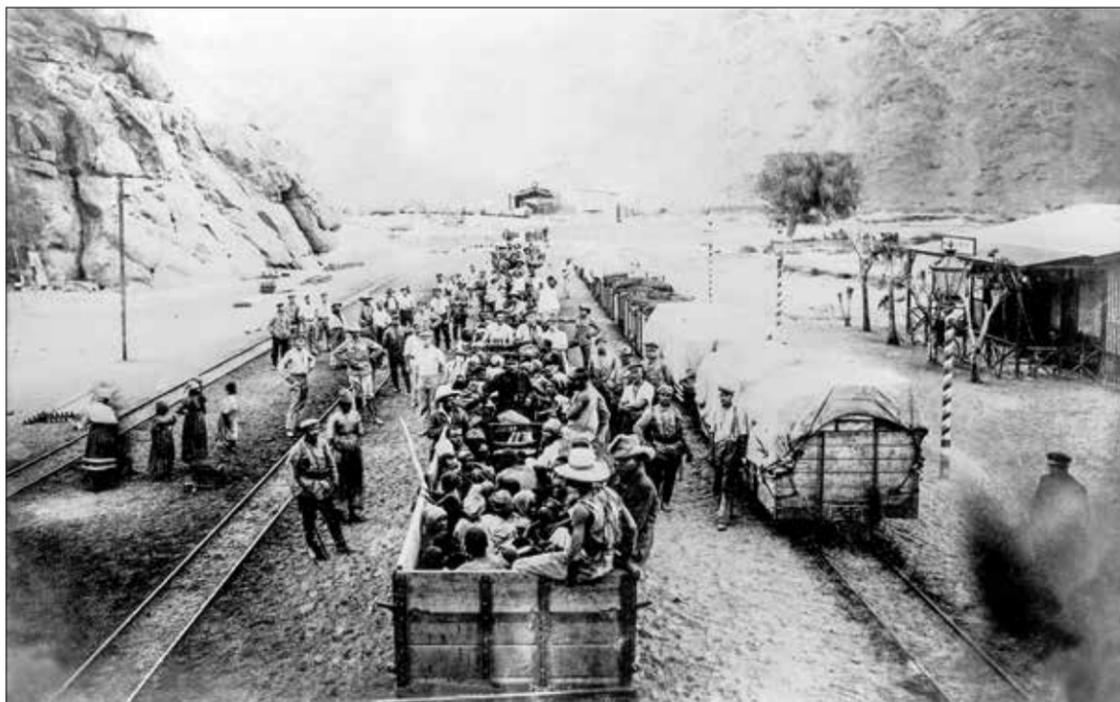
Kutako recalled: "We were crushed and well-nigh exterminated by the Germans in the [Herero rebellion] rising ... All our cattle were lost and all other possessions, such as wagons and sheep. At first the Germans took prisoners, but when General [Lothar] von Trotha took command no prisoners were taken. General von Trotha declared: 'no one is to live; men, women and children must all die.'"

During the war, Kutako smuggled Chief Samuel Maherero into Botswana. Maherero and the survivors were given shelter by Botswana's regent, Tshekedi Khama. Years later, the regent remembered "them arriving from across the desert and my mother being deeply distressed because of their utterly starved condition, barely able to crawl".

Of the 16000 who remained, 14000 were forced into concentration camps, where many more died under the unbounded cruelty of Imperial Germany, "like flies that had been poisoned ... The little children and the old people died first, and then the women and the weaker men. No day passed without many deaths. We begged and prayed and appealed for leave to go back to our own country, which is warmer, but the Germans refused". (Samuel Kariko in *Words Cannot be Found*:



**Vanquished: Herero Chief Hosea Kutako (above left) was able to smuggle some survivors of the rebellion into Botswana. A depiction of a battle that took place between Herero warriors and German colonials in 1904 (above right). Captured Hereros are transported by train to a camp on the coast in 1905 (below).** Photos: ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images & Chris Hellier/Corbis via Getty Images



*German Colonial Rule in Namibia: An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book.*

Their land was expropriated, and they were banned from cattle-raising and traditional forms of organisation. By 1907, German historians claimed that the Herero people had ceased to exist as a tribe.

At the outbreak of World War I, South African forces under British command invaded German South West Africa and successfully defeated the German army there. Namibia fell under South African administration. After the war, with the fate of Germany's colonies undecided, a decision was taken to compile evidence that would convince all the Allied forces that Germany should not retain control over its colonial territories, but that South Africa should be given the "sacred mandate of civilisation" of Namibia.

Major O'Reilly gathered oral testimony from the Nama and Herero and combined it with German and British documentary evidence. It was published as an official document in 1918. Fit for purpose, the *Blue Book* achieved its goal and Namibia was placed under the administrative jurisdiction of the Union of South Africa by the League of Nations,

thanks in great part to the presence of General Jan Smuts on the Imperial War Cabinet.

## Lest we forget

The publication of the *Blue Book* was not the first time South Africans and Britons had been made aware of the atrocities of Imperial Germany. Detailed eyewitness accounts had been reported in the *Cape Argus* in September 1905. These reports were confirmed by numerous official sources, including the British Magistrate of Walvis Bay (which had been annexed by the British before the Germans arrived), British Intelligence and the Foreign Office. The response from London was that Britain had promised Germany not to get involved. "It won't be easy to tell a great military power that its troops wage war like barbarians," said the foreign minister, Lord Archibald Rosebery.

In the *Blue Book*, the world now has a body of evidence that captures the testimony of African people during colonialism. This is very rare indeed. Nobody likes to talk about their trauma, but Kutako and others relived theirs in the hope of freedom. Lord Sydney Buxton, the governor-general of South Africa, in 1915

pledged in person to "the natives" that their freedom, land and cattle would be returned to them.

But South Africa set upon inviting poor white Afrikaner farmers to settle there. Courted with offers of land, dams and loans, they responded enthusiastically, and between 1920 and 1925, South West Africa's white population doubled.

In 1926, the first official act of the new all-white Legislative Assembly for South West Africa was to destroy all copies of the *Blue Book* and remove it from public memory.

The book had served its purpose. A new purpose had emerged. In the words of Smuts: "in my opinion, the future of South West lies in co-operation between the old German community and the new Union community that was settling her." (In *Words Cannot Be Found*).

## Exaggerated rumours

The birth rate among the Herero fell so low after the war that it gave rise to a concern that the Herero were committing racial suicide. But contrary to the expectation that the Herero had become psychologically unfit to survive, the period between the two world wars tells a remarkable story of Herero regeneration.

Small settlements of Herero began to appear on deserted farms, then German-occupied ones. Families began to return from their exile in Botswana. They began to accumulate stock. Both the women and men began to reclaim their pride of place and identity. In 1919, Herero representatives sent a message to Buxton: "We want a piece of land where we can live as a nation ... We have been captives long enough, we want to be free."

Land was not restored. It was further expropriated. In 1923, a proclamation allocated two-million out of 57-million hectares of the most barren and remote land in Namibia to African Namibians, who comprised 90% of the population.

South Africa made it illegal for an African to be found off the reserve for any reason other than labour. Africans caught off-reserve who were not working were arrested and made to work for a court-appointed employer under conditions they had no control over.

The African Namibians' hope of independence and restoration withered in a dawn that greeted them with military suppression, bombings and arrests.

## International accountability

The *Blue Book* achieved something that would be important for colonised people across the world in years to come: the idea that there should be international accountability for how imperial powers treated colonised nations. It was a small but important step toward decolonisation.

But that is leaping ahead. By 1935, it was reported to the Legislative Assembly that "all known copies of the *Blue Book*" had been destroyed. South Africa increasingly imposed its racial policies "more ruthlessly and brutally in Namibia than in South Africa itself", describes historian Chris Saunders.

As it became clear that Namibia had great mineral wealth, South Africa became determined to incorporate the country. It conducted a spurious referendum and falsely reported Namibian tribes gave their consent to incorporation. They told the UN that African Namibians were enjoying the schools and other amenities that South Africa had generously bestowed. The fact was that by 1940, the South African regime had only built two schools for African Namibians, and they only went up to standard three (now grade five).

It was then — for its story was far from over — that the *Blue Book* once again came into play. The Herero chiefs put it into the hands of an English priest with a reputation for trouble-making — the Reverend Michael Scott. After drawing international media attention to the scandalous cruelty of the South African government, Scott had developed the reputation for being "the straw at which desperate people clutched". He would dedicate the rest of his life to prevailing upon, in his words, "the conscience of the world" on the matter of Namibia.

Unfortunately for the ambitions of the Union of South Africa, his efforts would not return void.

**This article was developed as part of the blog project "Troubling Power: Stories and ideas for a more just and open Southern Africa", which marks the 40th anniversary of the Canon Collins Educational and Legal Assistance Trust**