



The Uplifting Africa Program

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Will Germany Pay Namibia Reparations for Genocide?



Descendants of survivors of the Herero and Namaqua genocide react to the official recognition of genocide by the German government in May 2021.

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After a Long Road to Reparations, Stalled Progress and Broken Promises

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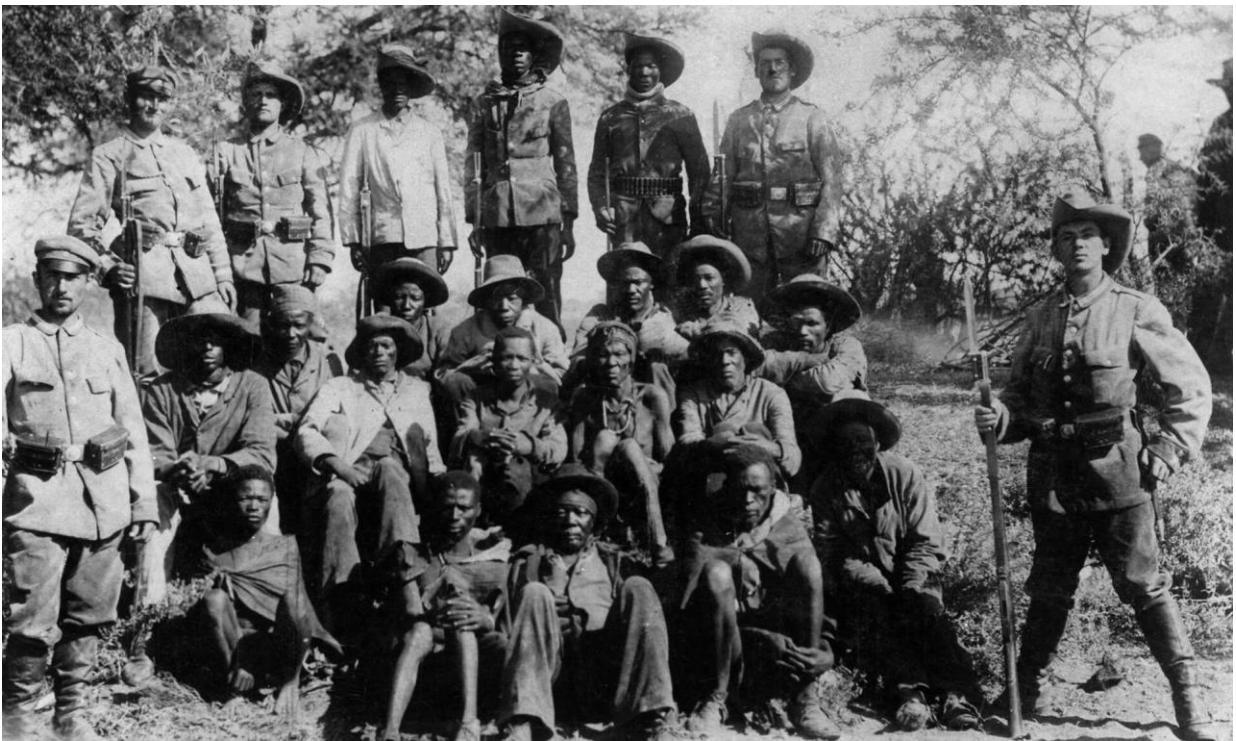
Germany has agreed to pay reparations to Namibia more than a century after carrying out genocide against the Herero and Nama people. The expected payment will be in the form of 1.1 billion euros worth of investment into social programs and development projects supported by the Namibian government over the next 30 years.



Descendants of survivors of the Herero and Namaqua genocide react to the official recognition of genocide by the German government in May 2021.

The Herero genocide was first formally acknowledged by Germany in 2015. In their first statement on the topic, the German government referred to the atrocities committed by Germany to be a genocide but avoided bringing up reparations or compensation. Persistent demands from both Namibians and Germans reopened the conversation as to how Germany can best atone for the incalculable loss of life they perpetrated.

Between 1904 and 1908, the Herero and Namaqua people of what was then called German Southwestern Africa actively resisted colonization in what was dubbed the Herero and Namaqua Wars. After the Herero people lost battles against the German military, they were pursued and punished for their insubordination. The colonial German military, led by the famously ruthless General Lothar von Trotha, enacted a program to systematically kill tribespeople, and forced able-bodied men to be enslaved in concentration camps. Those who could not work in the concentration camps, such as women and children, were killed and dumped into mass graves. Others were taken to the arid Kalahari Desert to starve or die of exposure. The Namaqua people also rose up to resist German colonization and those who were not killed in battles were forcibly transported to concentration camps. After Germany gave up Namibia as a colony following their loss in World War I, skulls of the genocide victims were transported back to Germany. Thousands of skulls remained there for decades and were foundational in the study of “racial science” and eugenicist pseudoscience later used to justify the loss of life. It is estimated to be over 250,000 people. Many of the



Holocaust: A German soldier poses with captured Herero fighters at a concentration camp in Namibia, 1906.

deceased died in concentration camps after being worked to death. It is difficult to estimate the

exact number, as some people were the victims of random shooting by the German military, who acted on “shoot to kill” orders for any person crossing into lands claimed by Germany. Survivors of the genocide lived with deep physical and mental scars, and a significant amount were forced from Namibia and did not return to their homeland for decades, if at all. The ancestral lands of the Herero and Namaqua remained in the hands of the German government, and then were passed on to the trusteeship of the white Afrikaner government of South Africa.

Tribal organizations and descendants of survivors stepped up their calls for reparations in the 1900s, after the success of neighboring South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The calls went unheeded for decades, although Namibia and Germany began informal talks in the early 2000s with the goal of eventually reaching formal reconciliation. However, progress seems to have stalled after May 2021, after which the initial agreement on payments was made between the two governments. Since then, Namibian activists, and even parliament members have suggested the 1.1-billion-euro price tag was not sufficient and the proposed development and social programs would neither adequately make up for the loss of life, nor would the benefits be tangible enough for the Namibian people.



Campaigners for direct reparations payments march outside of the Namibian Parliament in protest of the proposed development aid in 2021.

A debate in the Namibian parliament on the topic revealed that skeptics also fear the Namibian government will misuse the funds. Others argue they do not go far enough, advocating instead for direct payments to the descendants of murdered Herero and Namaqua. The most vocal groups are cultural organizations representing the Ovaherero and Namaqua people.

Spokespeople for both have expressed their dissatisfaction with the proposed reparations projects, the results of which will not be seen or felt for decades to come. Although all of Namibia suffered greatly under German colonization, the Herero and Nama were decimated and experienced the brunt of the atrocities. Therefore, the groups argue, reparations paid to the government purportedly for all of Namibia do not adequately address the specific people targeted a century ago. The chairman of the Namibian Genocide Association, Laidlaw Periganda, criticized the idea of development aid saying that none of the proposed projects work towards healing the wounds caused by loss of life, land, and culture. His organization is advocating for a German-sponsored buy-back of the ancestral lands of the Herero and Namaqua, much of which was given over to white settlers and has never returned to the ownership of the indigenous people.

The German government defended their choice not to pay the Herero and Nama directly by saying the reconciliation was between the two nations, and they could not selectively apply the proposed compensation efforts to only the Herero and Namaqua. As of February 2022, the reconciliation and reparation process has come to a standstill.

The recognition of the genocide was not legally binding under current international law, and therefore, the specific form and method of reparation is not mandated. Due to ongoing debate, there has still been no payment by the German government. A new Social Democratic government took over the reins of German parliament last October, which means there is room for adjustment on the reparations policies. Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union government, which had stalled on the reparations for decades, will no longer be at the table in upcoming talks. The German officials in charge of the reparation plans feel the pressure to get it right. The payment of reparations from a colonial power to a former colony would be the first of its kind in history and there is pressure on German

officials to get it right. Whenever the payment does go through and in whatever form, it will hopefully serve as a positive example for how two sides can heal from a terrible and traumatic past.

