

Revolution in Uwe Timm's Morenga: Towards a Comparative Analysis of the Herero and the German Democratic Republic Revolutions

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of history and memory makes us understand that history is a product of memory and memory cannot exist without history. Although scholarship has not given much attention to it as it has to the Holocaust, Germany's colonial past in Africa is something worth talking about. Coming in late in the colonial game, Germany still managed to acquire four colonies in Africa, namely: Cameroun, Togo, German East Africa (including present-day *Burundi*, *Rwanda*, and the mainland part of *Tanzania*); German South-West Africa (present-day *Namibia*). However, another Holocaust took place in German South-West Africa, which Germans tried to sweep under the carpet, a Holocaust that should have gotten the same attention the Holocaust against the Jews got. The Herero genocide or Holocaust came as a popular revolution against the colonial masters. There are several reasons that led to that popular revolt which led to the genocide of 85% of the Herero population. A comparative analysis of the 1989 revolution in East Germany and the Herero revolution shows many similarities and differences.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions: How similar or different are the contexts of the GDR and German South-West Africa revolutions? What and how have the power dynamics led to different outcomes? What role did race play in the outcome of the two revolutions? What role did memory play in the two revolutions?

Using Uwe Timm's fictional work *Morenga*, which is a colonial account of Germany's colonial past from a contemporary German, this paper argues that the Herero revolution and the GDR revolution had a common purpose: liberty but a different outcome. Within the memory and postcolonial theory framework, I show the role race played in the different outcomes.

Keywords: Colonialism, Holocaust, History, Memory, Race, Revolution

Introduction

The intersection of history and memory makes us understand that history is a product of memory and memory can't exist without history. Although scholarship has not given much attention to it as it has to the Holocaust, Germany's colonial past in Africa is something worth talking about. The European Renaissance ushered in a view of colonialism in another light, justifying Europe's or the "West's" acquisition of overseas territories. Colonialism is a topic that has always occupied an important place in former colonies' literature. Great writers like Césaire, Said, etc. have written on the subject. They have paid particular attention to the implications of the colonial venture on the language, culture and identity of the colonized. It is a structure often neglected by former colonial powers that find it difficult to come to terms with their past; when writers originating from former colonial powers write, their account is scarcely objective and mostly subjective. This is because whoever speaks and writes has the power of constructing history and memory. Colonialism has proven to be a subject of relevance for humans to know the past in order to understand the present and better prepare for the future. Coming in late in the colonial game, Germany still managed to acquire four colonies in Africa namely: Cameroun, Togo, German East Africa (including present-day *Burundi*, *Rwanda*, and the mainland part of *Tanzania*); German South-West Africa (present-day *Namibia*). However, another Holocaust took place in German South-West Africa which Germans try to sweep under the carpet, a Holocaust that should have gotten the same attention the Holocaust against the Jews got. In both scholarship and public consciousness, the memory of the German colonial period from 1884 to 1914 is less pronounced than that of the Holocaust, although large-scale genocides were also committed during the colonial era. The little attention paid to the German colonial era is also reflected in the less advanced state of postcolonial studies in Germany, compared to France and Britain. There are very few works that give a comprehensive overview or provide detailed analyses of German colonial literature. There appears to be scholarly and public reticence to face the German colonial past.

The Herero genocide or Holocaust came as a popular revolution against the colonial masters. There are several reasons that led to that popular revolt/ revolution which led to the genocide of 85% of the Herero population. A comparative analysis of the 1989 revolution in East Germany and the Herero revolution shows many similarities and differences leading to the success of one and the failure of the other. Though these two events are different-the Herero revolution and the GDR revolution, yet I examine how productive it could be to read these events together.

Revolution is a forcible overthrow of social order or a government, a riot, or an uprising. In the case of the Herero people, it was an attempt at overthrowing the German colonial government but in the case of the GDR, it was an attempt at negotiating with the people in power with the intention of reforming the GDR, a system that has imprisoned the people.

Among colonial books, Uwe Timms *Morenga* tends to be the one with the most objective account coming from a German writer.

This paper investigates the causes of the revolutions, the role of race in the success/failure of both revolutions and the multidimensional memory of these two events.

1. German Colonialism in Southwest Africa and the Colonial Problem and Research Today

Colonialism is the act of taking partial or full control over another country occupying it with settlers with the intent of exploiting it economically. Rash suggests that "the term

colonialism refers to a particular aspect of international politics which developed at a point in history when certain nations discovered foreign geographical regions which they deemed suitable for exploitation and domination” (Rash, 2). Today post-colonial theorists view racism and opportunism as the basis for colonialism. Eleni Kefala states that colonialism is a “particular manifestation of coloniality where ‘coloniality’ is seen as founded upon a racial classification of the world population and as forming part of the basis of the world system of capitalism” (Kefala, 1). The colonizers justified their action by claiming cultural, economic, intellectual and ethnic superiority.

Some German thinkers and philosophers attempted to discourage the colonial idea at the onset. Johann Gottfried Herder in his assessment of colonialism suggested that “European ideas of fair trade with non-European nations lead to unacceptable inequality and suppression and that enslaving others brings misfortune upon the Self” (Herder, 257). In the same vein, Immanuel Kant, referring to colonization, refused to classify humans with different coloured skin as members of different species. Kant maintained that “the exercising of force over native populations could only have a negative result in both human and economic terms” (Kant, 216). However, these ideas were not taken into consideration as they seemed not to favour or support the idea of colonization. The ideologies of the Professor of Medicine Christoph Meiners and the anthropologist Johann Blumenbach at the turn of the eighteenth century supported the idea of racial superiority of the white race and which gave a boost to the colonial idea. Fiedler suggests that Meiners’s view that outer appearance was a measure of inner virtue and that the negro, being perceived as ugly, was morally and intellectually inferior to the Europeans gained increasing ground in the nineteenth century (Fiedler, 60). Blumenbach will later pick up on these ideas and this appealed to the intellectuals in the German society. It was the influence of all these ideas that will later develop into “Social Darwinism”. Rash summarizes the intent, extent and consequences of the ideas in the following lines:

From the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Darwin’s writings took on a key role in the justification of colonialism and racism throughout Europe although this was certainly not his intention...Darwin got the idea that the less intellectual human beings would be exterminated by the more intellectual by a process of natural selection, and it was this idea that developed into ‘Social Darwinism’. Darwin did not, however, expect such a view to have the social consequences it did, reaching its peak in racist genocide. He saw the fact that ‘lower’ social classes and races would not survive as inevitable. (Rash, 12)

Darwin suggests that the less developed intellectual and social faculties of lower races were similar to those exhibited by primeval man. Furthermore, he claimed that the civilized man would eventually exterminate the savage races.

The German colonial era in Southwest Africa has not only been marginally treated in the research domain, it is barely present in the public consciousness. The remembrance of that period is virtually non-existent compared to the Holocaust, although genocides of great proportion were also perpetrated in Southwest Africa. Despite the silence of Germans over their colonial past in Africa, there are few German institutions that have taken it upon themselves to shed more light on the colonial discourse namely the “Arbeitsgemeinschaft Postkolonial der Universität Leipzig” and the “Afrikanistik-Institut der Universität Köln“. These institutions have taken it upon themselves to speak and enlighten the German population over the dark phase of the colonial area by organising seminars and making publications.

Furthermore, the lack of attention given to the colonial era in Germany is also revealed in the field of German studies. Works and research on that topic are limited, and new books and works are difficult to come by. However, when students and a few authors started writing on the German colonial era in the 70s and 80s, their works were trivialised. Furthermore, the lack of postcolonial studies in Germany also points to the German lethargy about the subject (Brehl, 35).

Until their 1871 unification, the German states had not concentrated on the development of a navy, and this had precluded German participation in earlier imperialist scrambles for remote colonial territory. Germany seemed to play catch-up. The German states prior to 1870 had retained separate political structures and goals and German foreign policy up to and including the age of Otto von Bismarck concentrated on resolving “the German question” in Europe and securing German interest on the continent.

Many Germans in the late 19th century viewed colonial acquisitions as a true indication of having achieved nationhood. Public opinion eventually arrived at an understanding that prestigious African and Pacific colonies went hand-in-hand with dreams of a high seas fleet. Both aspirations would become reality, nurtured by a press replete with *Kolonialfreunde* (supporters of colonial acquisitions) and by a myriad of geographical associations and colonial societies. Bismarck and many deputies in the Reichstag had no interest in colonial conquests merely to acquire square miles of territory.

In essence, Bismarck’s colonial motives were obscure, as he had said repeatedly “... I am no man for colonies” and remained as contemptuous of all colonial dreams as ever. However, in 1884, he consented to the acquisition of colonies by the German empire in order to protect trade, safeguard and export raw materials and take opportunities for capital investment among other reasons.

The rise of German imperialism and colonialism coincided with the latter stages of the “scramble for Africa” during which enterprising German individuals rather than government entities competed with other already established colonies and colonialist entrepreneurs. With the Germans joining the race for the last uncharted territories in Africa and the Pacific that had not yet been caned up, competition for colonies thus involved major European nations and several lesser powers (Barkindo et al, 54).

As Bismarck was converted to the colonial idea by 1884, he favoured ‘chartered company’ land management rather than the establishment of colonial government due to financial considerations. It is noteworthy to state that the German imperialist thinking was aided by the theories of great philosophies like Fichte and Hegel who saw Germans as a people whose ultimate destiny was to rule the world and to establish their hegemony over all nations. It was on this premise that Germans tried all they could to suppress any rebellion/revolution as this was against their self-imposed destiny (Gewald, 110).

Southwest Africa was a German colony from 1884 to 1915. This colony is present-day Namibia which is about the size of the German empire. Its population was made up of 80, 000 Herero, 60, 000 Owambo, 35, 000 Damora and 20, 000 Nama before the territory came under German rule.

2. Close Reading and Textual Analysis of *Morenga*

Morenga is a historical and documentary novel. In 1904, the veterinarian Gottschalk travels to Southwest Africa aboard the “*Gertrud Woermann*” which is a warship.¹ Gottschalk shares his cabin with Wenstrup, a veterinarian and senior physician Dr Haring. The fact that Germans left their country and came to Southwest Africa is a sign of imperialism, an attempt at using their power over other countries which is based on Europe's opinion of the “Other” (Said, 68). Moreover, it depicts the struggle between the colonized and the colonizer, West and East, North and South. Associated with the bourgeoisie are money, good living, travel, and good food while the emblem of the proletariat is servanthood. Timm states it clearer at the beginning of his novel when he writes, “one afternoon in April 1904, the farmer Kaempffer sends the Hottentot boy Jakobus, who has been serving in the house for two years after his youngest son Klaus to do his schoolwork. Jakobus, the faithful, runs off immediately” (7). Though Jakobus was very faithful, diligent and a good worker, one day he decided to take his destiny into his hand because he prefers freedom just as the Hereros decided to fight for their freedom.

All Hottentots disappeared before the uprising. The “Hottentots” connotes the natives, the “uncivilized”, the “primitives”. The Hottentots’ (Hereros) disappearance from the farm before the uprising serves as a warning sign. Normally they should be busy working on the farm, as servants they are supposed to be under the sun working. While these Hereros representing the proletariat are busy working hard on the farms, their colonial masters who represent the bourgeoisie are busy relaxing, supervising, and surveilling them while enjoying the produce of colonialism. This scenario depicts the condition of the proletariat (workers/colonized) busy in the industries while the bourgeoisie (colonists) take charge of their destiny. Nevertheless, their unanimous abandonment of the farms exhibits the unity among the proletariat preached by Karl Marx, “farmer Kruse leaves his farmhouse near Warmbad in the morning to divide the natives into work as usual. However, he sees no one. When he goes to the natives’ yard, he discovers that all the pontoks have been broken overnight” (7). The Strength of any revolution lies in the unity of purpose and action of the parties involved in that revolution.

At the beginning of the revolt witnessed the natives taking over the lands, cattle and weapons belonging to the colonial masters. The lands speak of possessions, the cattle speak of the food while the weapons speak of the power of oppression of the colonizers over the colonized, “in the early days of June 1904, a telegram arrived in Windhoek from the imperial government stating: A band of Hottentots armed in the South-East invaded isolated farms and Germans’ cattle and weapons were taken from the farms. The leader of this gang is a certain Morenga” (20). The land take-over relates to the rule of the colonized. They attempt at taking over the lands belonging to the Germans in an effort to recover what the colonists stole from them. Barkindo et al suggest that “a large number of Germans were encouraged to settle in Africa... the government acquired large parts of the best lands for them” (Barkindo et al, 50). Morenga is the leader of the Herero revolution. He is powerful, multilingual and very smart. As the leader of the revolt, in this case, he can be viewed as Karl Marx in his fight against capitalism and Edward Said in his intellectual battle against Orientalism. Said posits that

¹ Uwe Timm, *Morenga* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), 7. All future citations are taken from this edition and will be made parenthetical.

“Orientalism is a history of personal loss and national disintegration and it aimed to liberate intellectuals from the shackles of thought like Orientalism” (Said, 65). Orientalism could be seen as another form of colonialism and colonialism is another form of capitalism. Morenga, seeing his tribe shattered, battered and maltreated by the colonial masters decides to lead the revolt. Marx posits that “every liberation movement changes its character when it passes from utopia to reality”.

The colonial encounters between Germany and Africa were violent. The natives were treated as objects, and this treatment was based on the colonizer's view and opinion about the colonized. Said argues that the relationship between the Orient which represents the former colonies and the Occident representative of the superpowers is based on the conception of the latter about the former (Said, 147). Besides, it is symbolic of the relationship between the rich and the poor, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Even though the colonists tried to prevent the uprising, it was impossible because the natives wanted freedom by all means just like the GDR members desired a change and transformation through negotiation. They were tired of German oppression and preferred death to life under the German administration. Timm’s protagonist, veterinarian Gottschalk’s trip to Africa shows the imperialist spirit of the Europeans. An important feature of German colonialism was the exploitation of Africa and this had many ramifications and phases, “shifting the brutal, ugly form of exploitation of the Hereros in the South... introduce cheap raw materials and retrieve finished products with the highest products” (201).

When the German missionaries came to Africa, it was an attempt at civilizing the supposedly uncivilized Africans; however, they ended up committing genocide through the establishment of concentration camps, “this is our concentration camp explained Moll... (32). One of the strategies of war against the Herero was starvation. This is typical of the capitalist system and symbolic of the injustice in wealth distribution. The German's behaviour in the war against the Hereros could not be termed as civilized but as uncivilized. The treatment meted out to the Hereros and Namas was inhumane. The colonial adventure was huge. The struggle between the Hereros and the Germans is symbolic of the struggle between the oppressed and his oppressor. Morenga’s profile suggests that Africans (proletariat) are talented and intelligent. Morenga spoke English, Dutch and German. He was multitalented and multidimensional. Timm’s text succeeds in accomplishing such multidimensionality representation by Morenga’s ability to understand Germans’ antics and tactics as well as his ability to get along with his people. Although the Herero revolution failed, they won some battles and were able to kill some Germans. This is a sign of victory over colonialism, victory over class struggle, victory over capitalism. The exploitative nature of the German presence in Southwest Africa is demonstrated in the following words, “in the financial year 1904/0, the company sold for 830, 000 marks goods, which earned her a profit of 230, 000 marks...in the financial year 1905/06, the German colonial business for Southwest Africa already achieved a net profit of 752, 000 marks” (54).

Another sign of the German administration's violence is the abuse of prisoners during interrogation. This abuse and extermination was an attempt at racial extermination and annihilation, a manifestation of social Darwinism. The following lines describe the battle between the colonizer and the colonized, “at the beginning of January 1905, the big offensive

against the Witbooi Hottentots. Colonel Deimling hoped to destroy the Witbooi in a concentration camp with the reinforcements that had arrived in the meantime” (107). There was a belief that all fertile and rich lands should belong to Germans and must be taken away from the natives who are uncivilized. This is emphatic of the social injustice and the lopsided relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. The German attempt at grabbing all natives’ land depicts on one hand the contrast between Communism and Capitalism and on the other hand the greed, injustice of the powerful against the powerless and the rich against the poor, “the entire tribal area of the Herero is the crown land that is released for the settlement which is arguably the best land in the Southwest, good pastures and relatively much water” (34).

3. The Herero revolution

The Hereros and Namas are nomadic people who originally came from the Congo basin in Central Africa. The Hereros often came into border conflicts with the Namas. Only the Rhine mission managed to make peace between the Hereros and Namas in 1870. The prehistory of the uprising begins on 1st May 1883 when the Bremen merchant Adolf Lüderitz acquired areas that were later called Lüderitzbucht in exchange for weapons and other goods. A year later, on 30th April 1885, these areas were transferred for financial reasons to the German Colonial Society for South Africa which was the goal of the then Chancellor Bismarck, “die Regierung Kaufmännischen Gesellschaften, über denen nur die Aufsicht und der Schutz des Reiches und des Kaisers zu schweben hat” (Walter, 18).

the first German protected area emerged whose task was to conclude the protection treaties, which stipulated among other things that the German empire should protect the Hereros. The Hereros in turn agreed to trade with Germans. The other side of the agreement was for Germans to respect the customs and traditions of the Hereros. However, the ultimate goal of the Germans was to bind the Hereros and make them subjects. Nevertheless, the validity of these contracts is doubtful because the contracts were only written in German and only orally translated into the Herero language. This led to misunderstandings as most parts of the treaties were concluded and accepted only by seven Herero chiefs.

As the Herero traded with the Germans, the debt started increasing and the debts were later transferred to the tribe which compelled them to cede more lands and cattle. The German traders trying to collect their debts by all means after some time started collecting the Hereros cattle by force which was a sacrilege to them. This led to many quarrels between the Hereros and the Germans. The attitude of Germans who saw themselves as the “master race“ and superior to the Hereros and who had the Hereros feel this way contributed immensely to the escalation of the precarious situation. Colonial racial discrimination, massive loss of land, loss of freedom, and displacement caused the Herero revolution by work boycott and violence. The revolution because violent and bloody because the Germans had better firepower. The Herero lost 85% of their population which is considered by historians as the German Holocaust on African soil.

4. The GDR revolution

Contrary to the Herero revolution, the GDR revolution was more peaceful and successful leading to the fall of the Berlin wall. The revolution did not just happen out of the blue, certain forces came together to activate the revolution. Among those forces were the Evangelical church and other smaller groups who asked for reforms of the socialist state and the observance

of human rights (Oldenburg and Vale, 60). The growing frustration and depression of the GDR population led to an increase in the number of travel applications. It was in such an atmosphere that the church began to organize peace prayers such as the September 4 peace prayer in Dresden and September 25 peace prayer in Leipzig at the Nikolai Kirche gathering multitudes. The peace prayers will later be metamorphosed into large demonstrations in Leipzig, Dresden, and East Berlin. In addition, the “falsifications of the results of the communal elections on May 7, 1989” led created an atmosphere of distrust, rage, and frustration. Saunders suggests that

While the media representations of autumn 1989 invariably fall back on images of the fall of the wall, which were both plentiful and dramatic, numerous earlier events prepared the ground for this breakthrough: Widespread regional demonstrations, protests on the fortieth anniversary of the GDR, the foundation of citizens’ rights groups such as ‘Neues Forum’, the opening of Hungary’s border, and the uncovering of GDR election fraud in May 1989, economic devastation (252)

With the conflict in the SED leadership, all conditions were in place for the fall of the wall on November 9, 1989. At every point of the revolution, the ideological messaging changed. In the beginning, it was “wir wollen raus” which was a desire to flee the FRG which later changed to “wir bleiben hier” expressing a desire for a material transformation of socialism. In the Leipzig demonstration of 70, 000 people on Oct 9, the message became “wir sind das Volk” (Moine, 280).

Caroline Moine posits that German intellectuals and filmmakers played a huge role in the revolution. She argues that the revolution found expression in movies, paintings, and theatrical pieces (Moine, 285). The ultimate goal of the revolution changed a change that would lead to a transformation of the socialist state, to freedom in all its ramifications, and a better life. Though the revolution has been successful and East Germans have been able to achieve their aim but the lived experiences of GDR members in the West still bring back the memory of their former lives in the GDR It did lead to change and German reunification. But the question remains to know if Germany has been truly reunited and if East Germans have become part and parcel of the West Germany that so much desired.

5. The Herero and GDR Revolutions: Comparative Analysis

The ultimate goal of every revolution is changing, a departure of the old and an arrival of the new. In the case of the two revolutions under study, there are many differences and similarities between them. For example, in the GDR there was a state nomenclature with the SED as the only party to that every member was subjected, in the case of the German South-West Africa it was the German colonial government that serves as the colonial structure. Further, GDR members were under the surveillance of the Stasi, in the case of the Herero they were under the consistent watch and surveillance of the German military. Oldenburg posits that Stasi is a “shield and sword of the party”. Another condition that led to the GDR revolution was the economic depression and devastation experienced in the socialist state, in the case of the Herero, it was an economic depression created by an epidemic that led to the loss of their cattle coupled with the loss of their lands and displacement by Germans. Although the GDR revolution was peaceful and successful with regard to the Herero revolt, the Herero revolution was violent and failed. The GDR revolution succeeded because of sustained pressure on the authorities, right ideological messaging per time among the opposing groups, and an intense desire for liberty. Even though there were few pockets of violence, the revolution was peaceful.

Religion (The church) played a huge role in the success of the 1989 revolution. However, religion could not contribute to the success of the Herero revolution as seen in Morenga. Hereros believed in charms and holy water to protect them against German guns but those failed. Though the Herero revolution just like the GDR revolution was born out of frustration and intense desire for liberty, the revolution was laced with violence and failed because Germans were not ready to negotiate their control over their subjects, race also played a huge role in the extermination of the Herero as Germans saw themselves as the Aryan race and African as humanly and intellectually inferior to them which should not confront their masters thereby killing many of them. Carr suggests that “colonial Germany set a historical pattern of racism and discrimination against dark-skinned people in Africa and the African diaspora” (6). This was not the case in the GDR revolution as the police sometimes watched the large demonstrations and refused to use violence on the demonstrators. The 89 revolutions might have been violent if it were not for Germans revolting against Germans, if it were other races revolting against Germans, it would have been a different story entirely. While a multidimensional memory of the 89 revolution views the actors as heroes, the event as a turning point for Germany, the Herero revolution leaves a memory of racism, the Holocaust, colonial theft, and injustice. As the 89 revolution sites and objects such as the Nikolai Kirche in Leipzig bring the memory of courage, determination, fight for a change, and hope for a future in Germany, colonial sites in German South-West Africa bring a memory of rape, violence, colonial injustice and racial discrimination which brings up the question of Germany’s colonial history in Africa and a process of reparation and official forgiveness. Instead of sweeping and shying away from its colonial past, just as the 89 revolutions are being remembered and commemorated, Germany must be bold in talking about its colonial past and offer an official apology to the Herero.

6. Conclusion

The Herero and GDR revolutions show the importance of unity of purpose and the power of language in carrying out a revolution. While both events left memories that are still relevant to history today, those memories raise many questions still looking for answers.

Conflict of interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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