The Herero genocide of 1904: Source-critical and methodological considerations

Andreas Eckl

Abstract

The Herero-German War of 1904 has been downplayed as a “normal colonial war” by some, and emphasised as a genocide by others. While the first position is untenable, the second is reconsidered in this article through a re-evaluation of the sources and their treatment by academic historians over the last forty years. It is argued that a more rigorous, reflected and nuanced source-critique would complement the current historiography of the topic, which suffers from a questionable selection, evaluation and interpretation of textual sources.
In 1904, the Herero and Nama people of South-West Africa rose up against the German colonisers in a war of rebellion. This war, and the extermination order issued by General Lothar von Trotha that followed its end, is considered by most historians to be the first genocide of the 20th century. In 1884, the German State declared South-West Africa a German colonial territory. The genocide of the Herero and the Nama is an incredibly important but also brutal part of Namibia's history. Since the early 1990s, the Herero and Nama people have been working hard to ensure that this brutal crime that was committed against them is not forgotten.

Methodological Considerations. Define what you mean by "Holocaust". The Holocaust refers to a specific event in 20th century history: The systematic, bureaucratic annihilation of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and their collaborators as a central act of state during World War II. Make careful distinctions about sources of information. Students need practice in distinguishing between fact, opinion, and fiction; between primary and secondary sources, and between types of evidence such as court testimonies, oral histories, and other written documents. Hermeneutics — the science of interpretation — should be called into play to help guide your students in their analysis of sources.