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MAPS - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | **MAPS** - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 31 July 2021

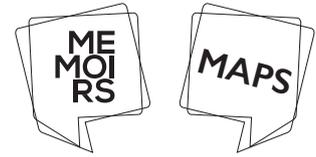


Sannad Sharef Amin | 2020 (mixed technique on wood/ courtesy of the artist and Downtown Gallery)

EPPUR SI MUOVE ?

António Sousa Ribeiro

It was reported on 28 May that the German Government, in a statement by its Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, officially acknowledged the violent repression of the uprising of the Herero and Nama peoples at the beginning of the 20th century in former German West Africa, Namibia today, as a crime of genocide. The President of the Federal Republic of Germany is willing to visit Namibia and present a formal request for forgiveness. This is no irrelevant news. Historians have long recognised the facts

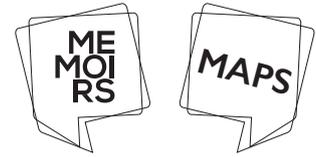


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under reference as the first genocide of the 20th century. In the context of German history, as the pioneering work of Jürgen Zimmerer has shown, the use of extreme violence by the German Reich in a colonial context served as a testing ground for the practices and technologies of extermination brought to the last consequences by Nazism. In particular, the form of the concentration camp as a weapon of extermination has its first systematic use in this context. However, until very recently, the official German position was one of manifest reluctance. In 2016, a parliamentary initiative demanding an official recognition of responsibility for the Herero and Nama genocide was rejected by the majority of the members of Parliament. The report set up by the Bundestag's "Scientific Office", an advisory board with the function of providing advice on matters scheduled for parliamentary debate, came to the conclusion, under the strictly juridical perspective that only norms already in place at the time of the events may be applicable, that the actions of the German army did not violate international law. The bottom-line of the argument is the sophistry that, in 1906, the German army could not have committed genocide for the simple reason that the concept of genocide did not yet exist nor had it been incorporated in international law at the time. While the report recognizes that, at the beginning of the 20th century, regardless of juridical norms, individuals benefited already from "rudimentary protection", derived from the "norms of humanity and civilization", it goes on to argue in a definitive way that "the legal conscience of the community of international law at the time excluded from these minimum criteria the indigenous peoples, that, in its eyes, were 'uncivilized'".

This is how the position which has now been made official - the result of six years of negotiations with the Namibian Government - takes on particular significance, and is undoubtedly one of the many signs which have been repeatedly surfacing and which bear witness to the fact that, with more or less hesitation, the former European colonial powers recognise the inevitability of confronting their colonising past and the need to translate this confrontation into concrete measures. This is how, in Germany too, last April, after years of heated controversy, the museums in Berlin agreed to return to Nigeria, in 2022, the bronzes of Benin they have in their collections, giving new impetus to the increasingly unavoidable debate on the restitution of goods plundered in colonial contexts. And several other examples come up regularly. However, the "reconciliation" agreement now established with the Namibian government needs to be properly understood and contextualized.

As several voices of criticism have pointed out, in particular associations representing the descendants of the victims (who do not recognise themselves properly represented by the central government, which made a point of conducting negotiations with the German government with full secrecy), it



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would be necessary to go much further. Although it is accompanied by a promise of economic aid - of a comparatively restricted size -, to be preferably applied in the areas currently occupied by the Nama and Ovaherero peoples, who together now make up only 12.3% of the Namibian population, the agreement does not include any liability for the payment of damages or for the return of goods and articles plundered in the context of the extermination campaign. In this sense, as expressed in the declaration of 3 June by the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights, it will be a “missed opportunity”.

It must be remembered that what has been a footnote in German history for many years is reflected in present-day Namibia in a very marked and traumatic way. It is estimated that more than half of the Ovaherero population and at least one third of the Nama population have been exterminated. The survivors were piled up in reserves and deprived of livelihoods. Mass rape of women was common practice, leaving a legacy that persists today. In particular, the massive expropriation of the land, perpetuated during the years of South African administration and kept virtually untouched after independence, brings with it the fact that it still a white population, predominantly of German origin, to hold the bulk of land resources and land of better agricultural aptitude.

The exclusion from the negotiation of representatives of the descendants of the victims explicitly violates the United Nations Declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples to participate in decision-making processes that concern them. However, the case brought in a New York court by these representatives against the German Government in this regard was dismissed last June. In the final analysis, therefore, the result achieved, while being, as already mentioned, a signal not to be ignored, is clearly representative of a double ambiguity that continues to doggedly mark the relationship of European countries with the former colonies: on the one hand, the maintenance by the former colonial power of a position of power that allows it to decide, without taking into account or even allowing the participation of those most directly involved, in this case, the descendants of the victims, the terms of the dialogue it sees fit to establish; on the other hand, the lack of legitimacy of national governments, forced, as in the case of Namibia, by the disastrous economic situation, greatly aggravated by the pandemic, to accept a clearly unsatisfactory agreement and deaf to the demand for democratic participation.

Coincidentally, or perhaps not, a recent debate triggered by an intervention by A. Dirk Moses, reputed specialist on the subject of genocide, published on 23 May 2021 in the journal *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, once again put on the agenda the question of the inclusion of colonial violence in the context of the history of violence that would culminate in the Holocaust. Moses' argument focuses on the reminder

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that the uniqueness and centrality of the Nazi genocide in the history of 20th-century European violence, while undisputed, cannot make other genocides be forgotten, particularly those resulting from European domination over colonised peoples. In the broad controversy surrounding Moses' text, the accusation of "relativization of the Holocaust" has not failed to emerge - as a columnist of the newspaper *Die Welt* literally wrote, the Holocaust cannot be compared to the "shadow zones" that inevitably accompanied the "progress of civilization". The truth, however, is that the undebatable uniqueness of the Holocaust does not suffer from the comparison; on the contrary, it is this same comparison that can make it emerge, while at the same time placing it in the proper context, that of the continuum of violence that marked European modernity. This is the virtue of the concept of "multidirectional memory" theorized by Michael Rothberg: comparison translates into more, not less, memory. In other words, if relativizing the Holocaust is an obscenity, it is no less of an obscenity to use the overwhelming meaning of the Holocaust to relativize other contexts of violence, namely the contexts of colonial violence. This means that, for all the minor advances that we cannot fail to note, there is still a long way to go to overcome the colonial amnesia that remains so present in European discourse.

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