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Repairing the ‘Suffering of the Others’?
The OvaHerero and Nama Genocide between Recognition and Misrecognition

Abstract: In July 2015, the German government used the term “genocide” in an official statement to refer to the mass killings of the OvaHerero, Nama, Damara, and San committed between 1904 and 1908 in the former colony ‘German South West Africa’. The acknowledgement of past crimes in the present is often understood as a ‘moral obligation’. However, this use of the term genocide was merely to be understood as a linguistic adjustment which rejected the OvaHerero’s and Nama’ claims for reparations. In this paper, I explore the construction of ‘morality’ and moral standards in Germany’s postcolonial memory politics and how they affect the recognition of Germany’s colonial past. Comparing the recognition of 2015 with the debates over the “reconciliation agreement” in 2021, the paper reveals the discrepancy between the recognition of the genocide and the misrecognition of the ‘suffering of the others’. By conducting a discourse analysis of newspaper articles, press releases as well as governmental statements and initiatives by opposition parties, I reconstruct the ambivalences of the rhetorical recourse to morality: On the one hand, the recognition of the genocide becomes a moral obligation. On the other hand, the OvaHerero’s and Nama’s demands for reparation are discursively placed outside Germany’s moral understanding of how to acknowledge colonial crime. As a result, the established moral collective ideal is identified as the ‘nation’s’ aim of ‘successfully’ coming to terms with its colonial past, thus perpetuating the misrecognition of the ‘suffering of the others’.

Keywords: recognition, reparations, memory politics, (universalised) morality, collective ideals, genocide, German colonialism, German South West Africa, Herero, Nama

Note: This paper draws on the results of my doctoral thesis submitted in 2022 to the Department of Social and Cultural Sciences at Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany, entitled: “Verstrickte Emotionen: Transnationale Perspektiven auf postkoloniale Erinnerungspolitiken in Deutschland und Frankreich seit den 1990ern Jahren”.

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1 Introduction

At a press conference in 2015, a spokesperson of the German government announced that the Federal Republic would henceforth refer to the crimes committed by Germany’s colonial army against the OvaHerero and Nama between 1904–1908 as genocide. ‘German South West Africa’ was declared a Schutzgebiet (‘Patronage’) of the German Reich in 1884 (Krüger 2011 [2004], 17). In reaction to the constant resistance to German expansion and land appropriation, the German Empire’s colonial troops (the so-called Schutztruppe) started a war against the local communities, such as the OvaHerero, Nama, Damara, and San, leading to the first genocide of the twenty-first century (Zimmerer 2011 [2004], 45). Although the OvaHerero and Nama have been advocating for an official recognition since the 1990s (Kößler 2015, 236–237), the mass killings of thousands of people were only reluctantly regarded as genocide in Germany and described as such (Bürger 2017; de Wolff 2021).

It was not until the 1990s – and due to the end of the Cold War (cf. Levy and Sznaider 2001, 234) – that recognition of past crimes gradually became the constitutive moment in Western memory politics. The sociologist Natan Sznaider (2011, 252) relates this shift to a universalisation of Holocaust remembrance which resulted in a “new system of universalised sympathy for the suffering of others”. Arguing in the same vein, the political scientist Elazar Barkan (2001, xi) observes a change in “moral rhetoric” which explains the preponderant focus on the victims of historical crime. Grounded in an increased ‘sympathy’ towards the ‘victims’, ‘perpetrators’ are more willing to come to terms with historical injustice and be in accordance with what Barkan (2001, xi, 315–316) calls a “new international morality”. Henceforth, victims and their descendants dispose of the “moral superiority” (Barkan 2001, 316) that is necessary to make ‘perpetrator’ societies comply with their claims.\footnote{The historian Yvonne Robel (2013, 81) states that taking responsibility for past crimes depends on the establishment of the victim. Conversely, the victim status requires the definition of the ‘perpetrator’. This perpetrator-victim-dichotomy not only levels historical ambiguities; it also allows for the transference of these statuses to subsequent generations which proves to be historically problematic (Trouillot 2000). On the other hand, the self-designation as a victim helps marginalized groups to make their demands recognisable (Robel 2013, 81). Due to these ambiguities, I use inverted commas to highlight the term as a self-chosen designation of the OvaHerero and Nama if I am not referring to the victims of 1904–1908.}

The proclaimed “exten[sion] of sympathy to the weak” would thus establish new, globally valid moral norms making it a duty to work through historical crimes (Barkan 2001, 315). However, the OvaHerero’s and Nama’s still ongoing struggle for recognition and reparation indicates that there is a need for elaboration on how
marginalised memory groups achieve ‘moral superiority’ to make their ‘suffering’ relevant to remember.

This paper is premised on the assumption that neither all pasts nor all victims of historical violence meet the conditions to be recognised. To unravel the unequal power relations that are usually concealed when universalised moral norms are invoked, I reconstruct the production of moral standards regarding the (mis-)recognition of the genocide of the OvaHerero and Nama. After 2004’s commemorations of the anniversary of the genocide in Namibia, debates over its recognition only became a topic in media coverage when a spokesperson of the German government declared on 10 July 2015 that the term ‘genocide’ would henceforth be applied to the crimes committed in former ‘German South West Africa’. In 2016, the government’s positioning was further confirmed by promising an official apology to the Namibian government. In 2021, former Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) eventually announced the conclusion of a “reconciliation agreement” with the Namibian government. On the one hand, I analyse the ways in which the ‘suffering of the others’ is produced in the course of this development and the demands of OvaHerero and Nama for recognition are either accepted or rejected. On the other hand, I concentrate on the negotiations of how ‘repairing’ colonial injustice is conceived of in German memory politics and on the question of how this understanding discursively changes from 2015 to 2021.

To do so, I analyse newspaper articles, governmental statements as well as press releases from representatives of the OvaHerero and Nama and their German allies. Choosing newspaper articles of the German daily press as a main source enables me to systematically scrutinise all relevant postcolonial memory events in the period under review and to integrate print media of the right and left leaning political spectrum. It can be assumed that the national daily press is widely accessible across Germany (Meyen 2013, 33), which, emphasises its “dual role” as a “public arena” in which political opinions are reflected and historical knowledge is actively produced (de Wolff 2018, 414). In detail, my corpus consists of articles from Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), Frankfurter Rundschau (FR), Die WELT, die tageszeitung (taz), and Neues Deutschland (ND). If frequently cited, I also incorporate articles from other sources, such as the weekly Die ZEIT. Altogether, I analyse 113 newspaper articles in the years 2015 and 2016 and 54 articles between May and August 2021.

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2 I use the term ‘suffering’ in quotation marks in order to highlight its constructedness and to point out that historical crimes are appraised differently in the present. Especially colonial pasts first need to be recognised as ‘painful’ to be considered ‘relevant to remember’ (Robel 2013, 74).
By putting in perspective the debates of 2015/2016 and 2021, the analysis argues that the ‘suffering of the others’ is discursively produced through the way it is mediatised. This paper shows how, in the process of naming the genocide, rhetorical references to moral registers prevent further concessions in memory politics. One major finding is that the German government rejects all reparatory demands for colonial crime. Instead, the Bundesregierung pursues the misrecognition of the OvaHerero and Nama as legitimate representatives by exclusively granting increased investments in development cooperation. On the other hand, the analysis of media reporting suggests that working through Germany’s colonial past has progressively turned into a moral duty. Despite the discursive shift, the paper emphasises the discrepancy between the recognition of past crimes and the recognition of the ‘suffering of others’. In the following, I therefore develop my argument that marginalised historical crimes first need to be made discursively ‘relevant to remember’ before their reappraisal is made a moral collective ideal.

2 Recognising the ‘Suffering of Others’ as a Moral “Collective Ideal”?

In 1994, and thus in the decade in which Barkan (2001, xi, 315–316) locates the change in “moral rhetoric”, philosopher Charles Taylor (1994) published his essay *The Politics of Recognition*. Widely cited, the text is considered the starting point for the theories of recognition formulated in the following years (Butler 2004; Fraser and Honneth 2003; Honneth 2016 [1994]). Taylor starts from the observation that minorities and marginalised groups increasingly demanded recognition and equal rights, which made the “politics of recognition” the constitutive moment of the present (Taylor 1994, 25). Taylor argues that the recognition of the self and the ‘other’ is fundamentally linked to the formation, confirmation, or rejection of identities. In his understanding

> our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being (Taylor 1994, 25).

However, by focusing predominantly on the formation of identities, Taylor is neglecting the question of who has the power to recognise or misrecognise the ‘other’. The philosopher Judith Butler (2004) draws our attention to the unequal power relations
that determine the ‘struggle for recognition’. In her analysis of US-American obituaries, Butler shows that the war casualties caused by US military are not mentioned, making their deaths “not worth a note” and consequently non-recognisable (Butler 2004, 34). Applying Butler’s thinking to the field of memory studies, Robel states that commemorating means “in a figurative sense, ‘we hereby recognise the relevance to remember’” (Robel 2013, 74). Creating ‘relevance to remember’ depends on speaking about past crimes and considering them important for the present. By speaking about it, historical violence is rendered intelligible. Therefore, processes of recognition are always performative since they establish and confirm the relevance of the past in the present and generate the obligation to remember (Robel 2013, 74). Turned into an obligation, remembering becomes a “collective ideal” that societies strive for.

Coined as a term by French sociologist Émile Durkheim, “collective ideals” are based on established moral rules, making social groups both the “addressee” and the “creator” of morality (Durkheim 1973 [1922], 134). Crucial to his concept is the idea that morality can never be analysed without considering the power relations inherent in the production of collective ideals established in and by societies as the anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (2009, 101) emphasises. However, most scientific approaches advocating for a moral obligation to come to terms with historical injustice are less interested in the production of moral norms as sociological facts. Instead, proclamations for an “international morality” (Barkan 2001) or a “transcultural empathy” (Craps and Rothberg 2011, 518) follow the normative moral standards constituting a ‘language of reconciliation’ (cf. Deslaurier and Roger 2006, 19; cf. Sznaider 2011, 248) which obscures the globally effective power asymmetries. Referring to Weber and Durkheim, Stoler argues that “the harnessing of affect in the state’s shaping of what constituted morality and who had the right to assess it” has always been the core of colonial governance (Stoler 2009, 69). Therefore, Stoler emphasises that consent to rule is achieved “by adjudicating what constituted moral sentiments (that is, affectively informed good reason)” (Stoler 2009, 69). According to this, societies only sense a duty to remember past crimes when their commemoration has become a moral collective ideal that societies agreed on consciously and voluntarily (Durkheim 1973 [1922], 165). This means that the social norms underlying the collective ideal also define the rules by which past crimes are assigned with “moral authority” (Miles 2004, 371) or not.

In conclusion, three elements are essential for the present analysis of the processes of recognising the OvaHerero and Nama genocide in German memory politics: Firstly, the visibility of the ‘suffering of others’ is a prerequisite for recognition, which, as Butler illustrated in her analysis of US-American obituaries, is only possible if the conditions for its recognisability are fulfilled discursively (Butler 2004, 86–87). Secondly, the ‘relevance to remember’ colonial violence mostly depends on the societies of the ‘perpetrators’ because demands for recognition are
predominantly directed towards them, which necessarily perpetuates power asymmetries. As we will see in the following analysis, the German government seeks to find acknowledging words, but “word with less power, words that did less” (Ahmed 2004, 117) and which wouldn’t change the political status quo. Thirdly, the moment of performativity is central, since the recognition of the ‘relevance to remember’, as Robel writes (Robel 2013, 74), might change the importance of the formerly marginalised past in the present. The following analysis of the unofficial recognition of the genocide in 2015/2016 shows in which ways the conditions of recognisability are discursively constituted and altered over time.

3 “Well, then make it News!”: The Unofficial Recognition of the OvaHerero and Nama genocide in 2015/2016

It was not until Namibia gained independence from South Africa in 1990 that the OvaHerero were able to advocate for the recognition of the genocide committed between 1904 and 1908 in former ‘German South West Africa’ (Kößler 2015, 236–237). In Germany, however, the genocide gained greater public attention for the first time in 2004 (Bürger 2017, 11; de Wolff 2021, 255–259). On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the “Battle of Waterberg”, then Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul (SPD) admitted that “[t]he atrocities of that time were what today would be called genocide” (Wieczorek-Zeul, 14th August 2004). Although being of far-reaching symbolic value, Wieczorek-Zeul’s speech did not have any political consequences. Both the term genocide and the request for forgiveness were declared the minister’s private opinion (Kößler 2015, 257; de Wolff 2021, 266–272). Parliamentarian motions put forward by opposition parties which sought to have the genocide recognised failed in 2004 (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), 2007/2008 (Die LINKE), and again in 2012 (SPD and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) (Robel 2013, 125–126).

In the following, I first refer to Michael Rothberg’s (2009) understanding of “multidirectionality” to show how the recognition of the Armenian genocide created the discursive context in which the naming of the OvaHerero and Nama genocide became inevitable. Second, I point out the German government’s strategy to link the naming of the genocide with higher investments in development cooperation. With the aim to avoid the payment of direct compensations to the Namibian government and/or the Namibian communities, development cooperation is portrayed as the only means of memory politics to work through the past. Finally, I
argue that the debates over the recognition of the genocide in 2015/2016 produce a divergence between the recognition of the genocide and its ‘victims’, thus perpetuating a misrecognition of the ‘suffering of the others’.

During the press conference on 10th July 2015, the spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry, Martin Schäfer, indicated that the use of the term genocide for the crimes committed against the OvaHerero and Nama would henceforth correspond to the official language of the Federal Government (Press Conference of the Bundesregierung, 10 July 2015). The chosen framework of a press conference highlights the diplomatic delicacy of the term since Schäfer’s statement is not equivalent to an official statement by a representative of the Federal Government. This is due to the fact that the Namibian and German governments have been working on a joint statement since 2014 in order to “gain a common understanding of what has happened” (Press Conference of the Bundesregierung, 10 July 2015).

Avoiding to anticipate the results of these negotiations, Schäfer uses the term genocide only as a quotation in reference to previous statements on that matter. First, he quotes from Wieczorek-Zeul’s 2004-speech, in which she classified “the atrocities of that time” as genocide. Consequently, her statement would now define “the political guideline [. . .] of the now acting Foreign Minister” as well as “the basis for the ongoing talks with our Namibian partners” (Press Conference of the Bundesregierung, 10 July 2015, 10). Since Schäfer himself refrains from using the term, the interviewing journalist insists on clarification: “The Federal Government says: It was genocide. – That would be a news story”, to which Schäfer replies: “Well, then make it news” (Press Conference of the Bundesregierung, 10 July 2015, 11). How can this surprising – albeit still unofficial – naming of the genocide be explained?

This rather unexpected shift in official positioning was caused by another memory political decision taken by the government: the recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Bundestag on 24 April 2015. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the genocide against the Armenians, the Bundestag held a commemorative event in which the term genocide was repeatedly used by all political camps (Gedenken an Völkermord an den Armeniern 2015, bundestag.de). The remembrance of the Armenian genocide and the discussions about its official recognition provided a context in which the crimes against the OvaHerero and Nama could also come into focus in German media coverage (de Wolff 2021, 293). Only two weeks after Schäfer’s press statement, then President of the German Parliament Norbert Lammert (CDU) publishes an article in the weekly newspaper Die ZEIT in which he connects

3 All translations of German newspaper article, governmental statements, and press releases are mine if not stated otherwise.
both genocides. In his article, Lammert expresses his surprise that the debates in the 100th commemorative year of the Armenian genocide were conducted with so much passion, while the “direct” “German guilt for the atrocities in the colonies” are hardly remembered (Lammert 2015, 9 July, Die ZEIT, 16). Following a brief description of the historical events in ‘German South West Africa’, Lammert concludes that “the suppression of the Herero uprising was a genocide”. Consequently, those who “speak of the Armenian genocide [...] must not remain silent about the German genocide against the Herero and Nama”. Lammert concludes: “[L]ike the Turks, we too bear responsibility for how we deal with this history” (Lammert 2015, 9 July, Die ZEIT, 16). The consequence of not working through colonial injustices would undermine the moral standards that have been established in German memory politics. In May 2015, the historian Jürgen Zimmerer emphasises the moral collective ideal by stating that “dealing critically with one’s own past, relentlessly exposing the dark sides of one’s own history [...] was part of Germany’s self-image after 1945”. The misrecognition of the genocide thus “calls into question the success story of German memory politics as a whole” (Zimmerer 2015, 9 July, taz, 4). Against the background of the clear attitude towards the genocide of the Armenians in 2015, the German government’s refusal to recognise the genocide of the OvaHerero and Nama jeopardises the collective ideal of a successful coming to terms with the past. The fact that the Federal Government cannot meet the moral standards is particularly evident in media coverage since newspaper articles leave no doubt that the crimes committed in ‘German South West Africa’ must be termed a genocide.

The analysis suggests, on the one hand, that the multidirectional references to the recognition of the Armenian genocide as well as German Holocaust remembrance created the discursive conditions that enabled the unofficial naming of the OvaHerero and Nama genocide. However, the genocide was not officially recognised by a representative of the Federal Republic, even though this wording had been declared the new ‘political guideline’. The official justification was that the dialogue between Namibia and Germany had not yet been completed. More significant, however, may be the fact that Germany wants to avoid paying reparations demanded by the Namibian government as well as the OvaHerero and Nama. Therefore, Germany translates its historical and moral responsibility towards Namibia into increased investments in development cooperation.
3.1 Germany’s “Political and Moral Responsibility”: Repairing Colonial Crime with Development Aid?

The article published by Lammert in 2015 illustrates how the process of recognising the genocide is equated with increasing investments in development projects. Even if Lammert argues that naming the genocide is not enough and that it would need more than development aid to work through Germany’s colonial past, he relegates the obligation to historical reconciliation to Namibia. For instance, Lammert refers to the construction of a documentary centre to reappraise the history of Namibian resistance in cooperation with the National Archive in Windhoek and the restauration of the Memorial Park Cemetery in Swakopmund. Interestingly, there is not a single mention of how Germany itself should work on its colonial legacies; he even minimises Germany’s role as a colonial power by stating that it wasn’t among the “leading” ones. In the same vein, Lammert points out that “Germany’s special responsibility for its former South West African colony” is already expressed in the highest development aid budget per capita for Namibia (Lammert 2015, 9 July, Die ZEIT, 16). Eventually, Lammert acquits the former colonial power from dealing with the genocide by construing development cooperation as a reconciliatory gesture to come to terms with the past.

The insistence on the payment of development aid underlines the asymmetrical power relations between Namibia and Germany as well as between the OvaHerero and Nama and the German government. As development cooperation is always carried out on the terms defined by the donors, it is thus the German government that specifies the conditions of a successful cooperation (Böhlke-Itzen 2005, 103ff.). Consequently, the power divides between North and South remain intact. Understanding the ‘special historical and moral responsibility’ towards Namibia in terms of development cooperation eventually denies the admission of ‘historical guilt’ which would equip the descendants of past crimes with the “moral authority” (Miles 2010, 371) to make their claims be heard. That the German government still defines the conditions of how to come to terms with its colonial past is particularly visible in its persistent refusal to pay reparations for the genocide.

When the German Foreign Office declared ‘genocide’ to be the official term for the mass killings of the OvaHerero in 2015, the alliance “Völkermord verjährt nicht!” demanded that the recognition of the genocide must be followed by a “formal apology” to the descendants as well as direct participation in the “negotiations for reparations” (Press Release of the alliance “Völkermord verjährt nicht”, 10 July 2015). The OvaHerero’s and Nama’s press statement illustrates those conflicts of interest concerning the negotiation of the recognition of the genocide not only exist between German and Namibian representatives, but also between the Namibian government and the OvaHerero and Nama communities. Paramount Chief Vekuii Rukoro repeatedly
emphasises that the “extermination order” was directed solely against the OvaHerero which substantiates their request that the descendants of the former victims and not to the Namibian government should receive reparations (Putsch 2016, 8 June, WELT ONLINE). Instead, the OvaHerero and Nama have not been recognised as official negotiating parties to this day. Interestingly, in 2015/2016, the press statements of the alliance “Völkermord verjährt nicht!” do not coherently employ the terms “reparation”, “compensation” and Wiedergutmachung. The interchangeability of the terms can be explained by the unclear legal status and the different financial, material, or symbolic demands that reparations can encompass (Barkan 2001, 324). By using the term Wiedergutmachung, for instance, the OvaHerero and Nama refer to the historical context of Germany’s Vergangenheitsbewältigung after the Second World War (“coming to terms with its past”, extensive definition in: Jesse 1997, 12). By doing so, the OvaHerero and Nama try to inscribe the genocide in ‘German South West Africa’ into German memory politics. Although media reporting is taking up on the reference to the German Wiedergutmachungspolitik for Nazi crimes, it uses it as a justification why the OvaHerero’s and Nama’s demand for compensation cannot prevail (cf. Rausch 2022). Repeatedly, legal constraints are evoked according to which “individual compensation” is only possible for those directly affected, but not for the descendants of the victims. Consequently, German special envoy Ruprecht Polenz (CDU), who negotiates with Namibia on behalf of the German government, explains to the press that compensation claims cannot be “inherited” (Vates and Geyer 2016, 14 June, FR, 6). But it is not until 2016 that the German government clearly distinguishes the different meanings of “reparation” to eventually rule out any reparatory claims put forward by the OvaHerero and Nama. In the response to a Kleine Anfrage (Question to the government) by Die LINKE, the Federal Government specifies that “reparations” (Reparationen) can only be considered as “intergovernmental compensation for war damage” (Drucksache 18/9152, 9). “Compensations” (Entschädigungen), on the other hand, are equated with the principle of Wiedergutmachung, which, however, “refers to the compensation paid by Germany to victims of the Holocaust and other Nazi injustices since the end of the Second World War”. Accordingly, Wiedergutmachung is not applicable to “the historical background and context of the German-Namibian dialogue” (Drucksache 18/9152, 10).

At this point, it is crucial to note that the German government establishes a morally justified understanding of the term genocide in order to exclude reparatory claims that could cause a precedent in international law. Correspondingly, the Federal Government further states in its answer to Die LINKE that “in a historical-political public debate, the definition according to the Genocide Convention” of 1948 can “serve as a benchmark to refer to the historical event as genocide in a legally non-binding way” (Drucksache 18/9152, 3; emphasis S.R.). As a result, the Bundesregierung employs the term genocide in a way that explicitly excludes any
consequences under international law. Regarding possible reparation claims, the Federal Government specifies: “The material claims [. . .] put forward by some representatives of the Herero and Nama ethnic groups [have] no legal basis in the view of the Federal Government” (Drucksache 18/9152, 9). Only two days after the Government’s reply to the Kleine Anfrage, the spokesperson of the Federal Foreign Office, Sawsan Chebli (SPD), officially speaks of genocide for the first time in her press statement. Furthermore, she announces a joint statement by the German and Namibian government which is to contain a “common language on the historical events” and the formulation of a “German apology as well as its acceptance by Namibia” (Press conference der Bundesregierung, 13 July 2016).

The promise to render an apology, however, required the naming and thus the recognition of the genocide. Consequently, connecting recognition and apology only became possible after having ruled out any possible use of the term in the context of international law (Eveleens 2016, 14 July, taz, 2; von Bullion 2016, 14 July, SZ, 5). The German government’s initial refusal to name the genocide, to formulate an apology as well as the continuous rejection to pay compensations highlight that German memory politics are solely responding to its ‘own’ moral registers. As a result, a rupture emerges between the recognition of the historical events as genocide and the misrecognition of the ‘suffering of the others’.

In spring 2016, when the first round of negotiations between the German and Namibian special emissaries Ruprecht Polenz and Dr. Zedekia Ngavirue starts without involving the main OvaHerero and Nama groups, a press release issues the slogan: “There can be no reconciliation without the consent and forgiveness of those whose resistant ancestors were murdered, displaced and dispossessed during the genocide” (Press Release of the alliance “Völkermord verjährt nicht”, 16 March 2016). Nevertheless, the Federal Government confirms in the aforementioned answer to Die LINKE that there would be no direct negotiations with the “affected ethnic groups” (Drucksache 18/9152, 5). How is the German press reporting on the exclusion of the OvaHerero and Nama from the German-Namibian negotiations, and to what extent are their demands recognised or misrecognised?

3.2 “Not about Us without Us” – The Misrecognition of the ‘Others’

In 2015/2016, newspaper articles on German colonialism increased considerably because of the (still unofficial) recognition of the genocide and the negotiations with Namibia. Equally, the demands of the OvaHerero and Nama have gained in visibility since postcolonial initiatives have induced a “change of opinion” on a national scale (Kößler and Melber 2016, 18 June, ND, 25). The analysis shows that both statements
by opposition parties and by activists are repeatedly quoted, such as those expressed by Berlin based Herero activist Israel Kaunatjike, the Paramount Chief of the OvaHerero Vekuii Rukoro, and Esther Muinjangue as chairperson of the OvaHerero Genocide Foundation as well as the Namibian MP and representative of the Nama Genocide Technical Committee Ida Hoffmann. Precisely, their exclusion from the ongoing negotiations is critically commented, which is illustrated by article headlines such as *Excluding those affected* (taz, 14 July 2016, 2), ‘Not about us without us!’ (ND, 17 October 2016, 12), ‘We do not forget’ (FR, 10 August 2016, 18), *Victims’ representatives demand money from Berlin* (FAZ, 11 July 2016, 1). However, media visibility is not equivalent to the recognition of the OvaHerero’s and Nama’s demands (cf. de Wolff 2018, 418). For example, one article in the *FAZ* attributes incompetent conduct of negotiations to the Namibian government and questions the representative legitimacy of the Paramount Chief Rukoro:

At the same time, however, the lack of progress is also due to the Namibian government’s inability to unite the divided Herero, Nama and OvaMbanderu. One of the most eloquent Herero leaders, for example, the self-proclaimed ‘Paramount Chief’ Vekuii Rukoro, is demanding billions and wants to negotiate directly with Berlin (Scheen 2016, 8 July, FAZ, 32).

The above quoted *FAZ* article presents the Namibian government as incapable to govern because it would lack the capacity to unite the divergent demands of the different interest groups. The recurring reference to the internal Namibian conflicts not only makes the OvaHerero and Nama responsible for the delays in the dialogue process, but also reduces dealing with the past to a Namibian matter. Furthermore, the OvaHerero and Nama are accused of instrumentalising the past in order to improve their own economic position in the Namibian society. The *FAZ* calls it a “political calculation” and argues that the “Herero activist Rukoro openly admits [that] ‘economic success [. . .] inevitably [translates into] political influence’” (Scheen 2016, 8 July, FAZ, 32). Repeatedly, Rukoro is portrayed as a ‘choleric’ man who is not willing to compromise, which disqualifies him as a serious negotiating partner. His reparation demands are consequently characterised as excessive and “unworldly”, which is highlighted by stressing the “high” development aid that Namibia already receives. The articles reproduce common colonial and racist dichotomies by constructing rationality as Western and attributing emotionality to the ‘others’. The *misrecognition* of the OvaHerero and Nama is reproduced by employing colonial and racist imaginaries, in which ‘white’ journalists direct

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4 Other persons and groups are hardly mentioned in media reporting, apart from the above mentioned OvaHerero and Nama representatives. Kaya de Wolff (2021, 370) argues in her dissertation *Post-/koloniale Erinnerungsdiskurse in der Medienkultur* that German media discourses reproduce an exclusively white perspective on the OvaHerero and Nama genocide.
their objectifying and racialising gaze at the ‘others’. The failure to recognise the experience of the victims’ descendants results in the failure to recognise the Ova-Herero’s and Nama’s demand for reparations. Nevertheless, media coverage, in contrast to the Federal Republic’s official positioning, unanimously demands an unambiguous naming of the genocide. However, the divergence between a recognition of the genocide and the misrecognition of the ‘others’ as legitimate representatives of their interests is consolidated.

In summary, the recognition debate in 2015/2016 has highlighted the ambivalences between discursively produced moral collective ideals and a normative invocation of the moral obligation to come to terms with colonial violence. On the one hand, the rhetorical commitment to moral responsibility marks the attempt to find words that do not change the memory-political status quo. Due to political pressure, the German government had to accept an adjustment of language, but it agreed to do so only on the condition that no financial compensation would be granted. Thus, although the moral rules shift to the effect that naming the genocide is unavoidable, the socially imposed collective ideal does not include the obligation to pay compensation. The repeated rhetorical reference to a morally justified responsibility is set in opposition to a political and legal reappraisal of the colonial past. Ultimately, the German government seeks to find words that would have less political consequences, words with “less power”, as cultural scientist Sara Ahmed strikingly phrased it (Ahmed 2004, 117). The following section asks to what extent the recognition of the ‘suffering of others’ becomes a morally accepted collective ideal in the debates over the “reconciliation agreement” announced in May 2021 by the German government.

4 An (Im-)Possibility to Repair Colonial Crime? Debates over the “Reconciliation Agreement” in 2021

On 28 May 2021, a press release published by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas announced that a “reconciliation agreement” between the governments of Namibia and Germany had been concluded. By the end of the legislative period in September 2021, according to the schedule of the Foreign Ministry, the agreement would be signed by the two parliaments, and Head of state Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) would have rendered an official apology in the Namibian parliament. When presented to the Namibian parliament in early June, opposition parties reacted critically to the outcome of the negotiations and called for renegotiations.
(Namibias Opposition ist erzürnt 2021, 10 June, FR, 9). As a result, the conclusion of the negotiations before the federal elections in September 2021 had already become unlikely by the beginning of June, the reasons being that the German government still refused to pay reparations.

In this regard, Maas’ statement leaves no doubt that the Bundesregierung pursues memory politics in terms of development cooperation as the following excerpt from the press statement shows:

Our aim was and remains to find a shared path towards genuine reconciliation in memory of the victims. This includes being unreserved and unflinching in naming the events of the German colonial period in what is now Namibia and in particular the atrocities between 1904 and 1908. We will now officially call these events what they are from today’s perspective: a genocide.

Given Germany’s historical and moral responsibility, we will ask Namibia and the descendants of the victims for forgiveness.

As a gesture of recognition of the immeasurable suffering inflicted on the victims, we want to support Namibia and the victims’ descendants with a substantial programme to the tune of 1.1 billion euro for reconstruction and development. The communities affected by the genocide will play a key role in shaping and implementing this programme. Legal claims for compensation cannot be derived from it (Press release of the Federal Foreign Office, 28 May 2021, emphasis S.R.).

Maas’ press release confirms the German government’s position that the recognition of the genocide would not result in any claims under international law, since the criminal offence of genocide only acquired international validity with the adoption of the UN Genocide Convention in 1948. The socialist newspaper ND quotes a press release of the association Berlin Postkolonial, which criticises “the continuing non-recognition of the genocide under international law”. The newspaper continues that “the Federal Government falls ‘even behind the position’ of then Federal Development Minister Wieczorek-Zeul (SPD) in 2004” by recognising the genocide “from today’s perspective” (Deutschland erkennt seine Verbrechen in Namibia an – irgendetwie 2021, 28 May, nd-aktuell.de).

The demand for a recognition under international law has never been put forward so clearly by activists before. On 16 May, a joint press release of the Paramount Chief Vekuii Rukoro (Ovaherero Traditional Authority – OTA) and the Nama representative Gaob Johannes Isaack (Nama Traditional Leader Association – NTLA) states:

Germany still has NO intention to recognise that what von Trotha did constitutes genocide in terms of international law, therefore, Germany did not commit a crime against humanity and has no intention to apologise for ANY crime of GENOCIDE – especially not to the descendants of the Victim Communities! (Press statement of the alliance “Völkermord verjährt nicht!” and Joint Press Statement by Paramount Chief Advocate Vekuii Rukoro (OTA) and Gaob Johannes Isaack (NTLA), 17 May 2021, capitalisation in original).
The reason for this reference to international law is “the continued refusal of reparations by the Federal Republic of Germany”, as stated in the German press statement of the alliance “Völkermord verjährt nicht!”. In contrast to 2015/16, the debate is shifting from recognising the genocide in official statements to its recognition under international law, placing the demand for material reparations centre stage. However, the German government’s willingness to recognise and apologise for the genocide is still translated into development projects. Therefore, the OvaHerero and Nama associations, such as the OTA or the NTLA, now insist on the term ‘reparations’ because it is the descendants of the affected groups that should be legitimate addressees to work through the past. The newspaper taz therefore concludes that the “obligation to make amends” can only be met if the genocide is recognised under international law (Johnson 2021, 29/30 May, taz, 7).

Following the critical reactions of the OvaHerero and Nama, the question of how to repair colonial crime dominates media reporting in 2021. Although most articles consider reparations to be unlikely, the fact that they are being discussed renders them intelligible in memory political terms. The journalist Bernd Dörries states that “[t]he genocide in Namibia […] has been treated for many decades as a legal problem, not as a human and moral one. The idea was not to set a precedent for the suffering of other peoples” (Dörries 2021, 28 May, Südwestdeutsche.de). Dörries points to the ambivalences in the discursive construction of “law” and “morality” as divergent and even opposite realms. By this token, the German government rationalises the legal framework as a non-negotiable given. However, the naming of the genocide in 2015/2016 initiated a shift of moral registers. A change of the moral collective ideal – which now consists of working through Germany’s colonial past – could therefore result in a reassessment of the current legal framework (cf. Goldmann 2020). Albeit the German government continues to refuse paying reparations, the analysed newspaper articles increasingly challenge existing legal norms and unanimously demand at least financial compensation in their reporting in 2021.

In contrast to 2015/2016, the discourse analysis shows that most of the articles – no matter of which political spectrum – support the OvaHerero’s and Nama’s demands for compensatory payments. Nevertheless, a recognition of the genocide under international law is still considered unlikely. For example, the FR states that “once again there is no talk of direct compensation for the Herero and Nama” and that “Berlin’s hesitant steps towards reparations […] are observed with suspicion not only in Windhoek” (Dieterich 2021, 29 May, FR, 13). The government’s reasoning is the same as in the 2015/2016 recognition debates: Neither the term “reparation” nor “compensation” are used. According to the FAZ, the aim is to prevent a precedent “that other countries could invoke against Germany” (Bröll and Haupt 2021, 29 May, FAZ, 2). For this reason, “[t]he billions now agreed on […] should be understood merely as a political-moral obligation” as the FR underscores (Huesmann
2021, 29 May, FR, 7, emphasis S.R.). The SZ, in turn, states that “the German state [has] not managed to apologise adequately for the crimes and to compensate the people” (Aktuelles Lexikon ‘Deutsch-Südwestafrika’ 2021, 18 May, SZ, 4), and the above-quoted article published in FR estimates that “even in its overdue acknowledgement of guilt […] the Federal Government [has] scrupulously taken care to exclude the question of compensation for the almost complete extermination of the ethnic groups” (Huesmann 2021, 29 May, FR, 7). These excerpts suggest that the exclusively morally justified “gesture of recognition” which aims at increasing the expenses for development cooperation is perceived as insufficient.

Correspondingly, the OvaHerero’s and Nama’s demand for a “reparation agreement” instead of a “reconciliation agreement” cannot solely be explained by the request for direct compensation, but also needs to be understood as a strategy to inverse the power dynamics at play. In fact, agreeing on reparations would enable the OvaHerero and Nama to define the concrete amount and the conditions of the payment (cf. Selz 2021, 22 May, nd-aktuell.de). Instead, Germany still defines the conditions under which the past is worked through by dictating the terms under which development aid is paid. In this regard, the SZ even criticises the German-Namibian dialogue process as such by asking: “A ‘negotiation’ on whether to accept historical facts? That means one sets conditions. One makes demands. How can one, especially as the legal successor of the perpetrators, come up with such a presumptuous idea?” (Steinke 2021, 30 May, Süddeutsche.de). For this reason, the SZ-journalist considers it “absurd” that the German government is pursuing the strategy of preventing the recognition according to the Genocide Convention. Ultimately, the analysed newspaper articles follow the OvaHerero’s and Nama’s definition of how a just working through of Germany’s colonial crimes should look like: First, it would require the acknowledgement of historical guilt, second, the formulation of an official apology and third, financial compensation (but not necessarily reparations) paid to the descendants. The FAZ therefore issues the corresponding slogan: “Whoever asks for forgiveness is in debt. He must first acknowledge his guilt and secondly explain what follows from it” (Bröll and Haupt 2021, 29 May, FAZ, 2).

In conclusion, criticism expressed by the OvaHerero and Nama, German activists as well as the Namibian opposition are even more visible in the analysed newspaper articles in 2021 in comparison to 2015/16. The German dominance in the dialogue process is not only criticised, but also denounced as a postcolonial power asymmetry. In reaction to the massive Namibian criticism of the one-sided conduct of the negotiations, the SZ concludes that “reconciliation cannot be achieved against the will of those people whom one wants to ask for forgiveness. The fact that now apparently numerous descendants of the victims are angry is not a good sign, and it puts the planned trip of the Head of State to Windhoek into the distant future” (Perras 2021, 8 June, SZ, 8). In fact, Foreign Minister Maas and Head of State...
Steinmeier have postponed their travels to Namibia to issue an apology for an indefinite period (Melber 2021). The unforeseen public pressure, also exerted by the Namibian opposition parties, thus seems to have changed the OvaHerero’s and Nama’s negotiating position. In January 2022, the OTA and NTLA have launched another petition calling “to restart the failed German-Namibia intergovernmental negotiations on the genocide of our ancestors WITH US” (Petition on change.org 2022, Capitalisation in original). It remains to be seen how the new government will respond to the demands of the OvaHerero and Nama.

5 Conclusion: Practices of Misrecognition

The discourse analysis in this article showed that the German government attempted to realise the recognition of the OvaHerero and Nama genocide as a solely linguistic readjustment, which would prevent further political consequences. Consequently, the understanding of morality was ambiguously constructed: On the one hand, moral standards were called upon to justify the official naming of the genocide and Germany’s increased commitment in development cooperation. On the other hand, however, the OvaHerero’s and Nama’s demands for reparations were discursively placed outside the moral collective ideal, thus perpetuating a continuous misrecognition of their ‘suffering’.

The multidirectional framework created by the recognition of the Armenian genocide pressured the German government to also take a stand regarding the genocide in the former ‘German South West Africa’. By declaring ‘genocide’ the official term to be applied regarding the mass killings of the OvaHerero, Nama, Damara, and San, the understanding of ‘political and moral responsibility’ towards Namibia expanded discursively. Henceforth, Germany’s efforts in development cooperation are conceived of as a memory political tool to come to terms with the colonial past. Consequently, taking responsibility for the past is defined in moral terms, which decidedly dismisses legal and political actions. The future-oriented development cooperation not only excludes the historical re-evaluation of German colonialism, but it also legitimises the rejection of the reparation claims pronounced by the OvaHerero and Nama. The analysis of German media reporting between 2015 and 2021 highlighted the discrepancy between an increasing willingness to recognise the genocide on the one hand, and a persistent misrecognition of the OvaHerero and Nama as affected groups on the other.

However, the Bundesregierung also legitimised the term ‘genocide’ for media use by officially speaking of genocide, thus enabling the enunciation of further memory political demands: Whereas the OvaHerero and Nama have been demanding the
recognition of the genocide, an official apology, and the payments of compensation since the 1990s, these three components became increasingly mediatised in the analysed newspaper articles from 2015/16 onwards. As a result, media reporting agrees that the recognition of the genocide must be followed by an official apology while also considering financial compensations to the descendants of the victims. After all, the official naming of the genocide made colonial violence discursively intelligible. Instead of successfully relegating the colonial past to the sphere of development cooperation, the naming concluded in a process for recognition which eventually ascribed “relevance to remember” to the genocide (Robel 2013, 74). Yet, naming colonial violence describes neither a starting nor an end point in negotiating memory politics; instead, it highlights its performative character enabling processes of recognition as well as of misrecognising of (post-)colonial memories. What this paper intended to show is that the production of moral collective ideals does not necessarily result in the recognition of the ‘suffering of the others’. Rather, the memory political interest consists of living up to the nationally established moral standards of ‘successfully’ coming to terms with the colonial past.

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