

From Boondoggle to Settlement Colony: Hendrik Witbooi and the Evolution of Germany's Imperial Project in Southwest Africa, 1884–1894

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ABSTRACT. In the span of ten years, what started as a minor commercial enterprise in a faraway African territory grew into an important extension of the German state. This article reorients our understanding of the relationship between the *Kaiserreich* and its overseas empire, specifically with a focus on Captain Hendrik Witbooi and on how the Witbooi Namaqua he led influenced the evolution of German imperial rule in Southwest Africa between 1884 and 1894. Witbooi's refusal to accept imperial authority compelled colonial officials to confront their administrative limitations in the colony. When the façade of imperial fantasy gave way to colonial reality, German administrators expanded the size and scope of the imperial government to subdue the Namaqua. The article emphasizes the appointments of *Landeshauptmann* Curt von François and Governor Theodor Leutwein as critical examples of Witbooi's impact on imperial policy, as well as the colonial administration's embrace of military violence to attain German supremacy in Southwest Africa. An emphasis on the Witbooi Namaqua illustrates the prominent role of Africans in German colonial history and exposes how peoples in distant places like Windhoek and Otjimbingwe manipulated official efforts to control and exploit the colony.

Was als kleines kommerzielles Unterfangen in einem weit entfernt gelegenen afrikanischen Gebiet begann, wuchs im Laufe von zehn Jahren zu einer wichtigen Erweiterung des deutschen Staates an. In diesem Aufsatz wird unser Verständnis der Verbindung zwischen dem Kaiserreich und seiner Überseegebiete neu ausgerichtet, und zwar insbesondere mit einem Fokus auf Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi und wie die von ihm angeführten Witbooi Namaqua die Entwicklung deutscher Imperialherrschaft in Südwestafrika zwischen 1884–1894 beeinflussten. Durch Witboois Weigerung, die imperiale Befehlsgewalt anzuerkennen, wurden die Kolonialbeamten in der Kolonie mit ihren administrativen Grenzen konfrontiert. Als die Fassade der imperialen Fantasie von der kolonialen Realität abgelöst wurde, erweiterten die deutschen Administratoren Größe und Umfang der imperialen Herrschaft, um die Namaqua zu unterwerfen. Der Aufsatz konzentriert sich auf die Berufungen des Landeshauptmanns Curt von François und Gouverneurs Theodor Leutwein als entscheidende Beispiele für Witboois Einfluß auf die imperiale Politik sowie die Ergreifung militärischer Gewalt durch die Kolonialadministration zur Wahrung der deutschen Vorherrschaft in Südwestafrika. Eine solche, nähere Beschäftigung mit den Witbooi Namaqua zeigt die prominente Rolle der Afrikaner in der deutschen Kolonialgeschichte und enthüllt, wie Völker in

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fernen Orten wie Windhoek und Otjimbingwe die offiziellen Versuche, die Kolonie zu kontrollieren und auszubeuten, manipulierten.

IN March 1889, Captain Hendrik Witbooi, the leader of the Witbooi Namaqua—the largest ethnic group of the Khoikhoi community indigenous to the Cape Colony (present-day South Africa) and the Bechuanaland Protectorate (present-day Botswana)—sent a letter to *Reichskommissar* Heinrich Ernst Göring of German Southwest Africa (*Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, DSWA). “I appeal to you,” he wrote, “be so good as to distance yourself from chiefs who engage in treachery [against me]. I consider it ill-judged of Your Excellency to cooperate with those who cannot make peace and are therefore envious of me. Stay neutral ... so [Captain Jan Afrikaner and I] can fight it out between ourselves.”¹ Though the origins of the conflict between Witbooi and Afrikaner preceded the arrival of German officials in Southwest Africa, Witbooi’s requests were part of a targeted response against the colonial government.² In particular, he wanted German administrators to vacate the protection treaties they had negotiated with Afrikaner following their seizure of DSWA in April 1884.

On the surface, protection agreements offered both sides acceptable outcomes at what the popular German periodical *Koloniales Jahrbuch* regarded as a “minimum cost.”³ Africans could maintain a degree of sovereignty in their traditional spheres of control, while white settlers could exploit the colony without fear of rebellion. In truth, however, German merchants, farmers, and military personnel intended to use these treaties as “speedy actions [to secure] certain areas for future colonial purposes.”⁴ In February 1885, for example, Sigmund Israel, an employee in Adolf Lüderitz’s merchant enterprise in DSWA, deemed that protection agreements were the best means available “to achieve the cession of Damaraland [central Namibia] or, at least, a portion of territory large enough to open up a route to Central Africa.”⁵ C. G. Büttner, a former Protestant missionary and close associate of Göring, had made a similar claim the previous year in the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* (DKZ), the largest and most influential publication of the German Colonial Society (*Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft*, DKG). In his estimation, DSWA was the key to central Africa. “The significance of the colony,” Büttner wrote, “will only become fully manifest if one does not take a narrow look at the situation, but instead looks upon it as a way of accessing Africa’s interior.”⁶ Africans, meanwhile, often negotiated with German officials to affirm their

¹Hendrik Witbooi, “14. Witbooi an Göring vom Hornkranz,” March 23, 1889, in Hendrik Witbooi, *Afrika den Afrikanern! Aufzeichnungen eines Nama-Häuptlings aus der Zeit der deutschen Eroberung Südwestafrikas 1884 bis 1894* (Munich: JHW Dietz, 1982), 60–61. The Namaqua called Witbooi Knaob !Nanseb / Gabemab, which means: “The captain who disappears in the grass.” His Herero name was Korota.

²The Afrikaners rose to prominence in central Namibia in the 1840s under the leadership of Jonker Afrikaner. After his death in 1861, Afrikaner hegemony waned as other groups moved into the territory. Jan Jonker Afrikaner assumed control of the Afrikaner after the death of his older brother in 1863. He later allied with the Herero and settled near Otjimbingwe. Jan Jonker Afrikaner died in battle against Hendrik Witbooi in 1889.

³*Koloniales Jahrbuch*, vol. 2, 1889, in Horst Drechsler, “*Let Us Die Fighting*”: *The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism (1884–1915)* (London: Zed Press, 1980), 27.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Sigmund Israel, *Cape Argus*, Feb. 7, 1885, in Drechsler, *ibid.*, 26.

⁶C.G. Büttner, “Deutschland und Angra Pequena,” *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, vol. 15, 1884.

independence from the colonial regime.⁷ Many of their leaders also believed that German soldiers could help safeguard their cattle herds from local rivals.⁸

German promises of independence and security never swayed Witbooi, however. From the very start of the colonial era, he contested imperial hegemony with all the means at his disposal. Witbooi's anti-colonial program principally centered on his conviction that the Namaqua were masters of their own fate and that they had the right to live outside the bounds of foreign control.⁹ After the colonial administration raised the imperial flag in Windhoek, he tested the limits of German power using a variety of methods. Witbooi attacked rival African communities aligned with the colonial state, rendered trade routes that ran through his territory impassable, forbade white settlers from prospecting on his land, and refused to sell cattle, supplies, and property to imperial forces.¹⁰ He also wrote letters to colonial officers where he mused on religious matters, his relationship with other regional groups, and the inherent contradictions behind "protection" treaties. Though the signatory powers of the 1885 Berlin Conference regarded Southwest Africa as a German protectorate, colonial authorities could affect very little policy without the support of local populations.¹¹ In practical terms, Germany's marginal foothold in DSWA before 1894 was principally a result of the aid of Protestant missionaries and the mercy of Africans—not the other way around.¹²

Interest in German colonial history has grown considerably in the twenty years since the publication of Susanne Zantop's classic study on the maturation of "colonial fantasies" in pre-colonial Germany.¹³ Much of the recent scholarship has focused on colonial-era violence and its impact on exclusionary political movements in Germany before and after World War I.¹⁴ Scholars have also increasingly emphasized the transnational orientation of

⁷Among the first groups to sign protection treaties with the German government were the Reheboth Basters, the "Red Nation," the Bethanie people, and the Berseba.

⁸For instance, Maharero, chief of the Herero (Ovaherero), signed a German protection treaty in 1885 to help defend his large cattle herds against Namaqua raids in central Damaraland. He soon discovered that German forces were too weak to provide any real protection and rejected the entire government as a false power. See Jan-Bart Gewald, *Towards Redemption: A socio-political history of the Herero of Namibia between 1890 and 1923* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1996).

⁹George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 120.

¹⁰Christian Bochert, "The Witboois and the Germans in South West Africa: A Study of their Interaction between 1863 and 1905" (MA thesis, University of Natal, 1980), 45. Also see Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*, 45, 148.

¹¹Wolfgang Werner, "A Brief History of Land Dispossession in Namibia," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19, no. 1 (March 1993): 138.

¹²See Gewald, *Towards Redemption*, 28–46.

¹³Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

¹⁴See Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (London: Cornell University Press, 2005); Jürgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner: Staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004); idem, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz: Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011); idem, *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904–1908 and its Aftermath*, trans. E. J. Neather (Wales: Merlin Press, 2008); Benjamin Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe," *European History Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2003): 429–64; idem, "Patterns of Frontier Genocide 1803–1910: The Aboriginal Tasmanians, the Yuki of California, and the Herero of Namibia," *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 2 (June 2004): 167–92.

the metropole and its global empire.¹⁵ This necessary development has led to a more holistic appraisal of colonialism and its effect on German national elections, institutional practices, views on “traditional” gender roles, commercial marketing campaigns, the proliferation of travel literature, anthropology and new forms of scientific analysis, the growth of Pan-German leagues, and social rights movements.¹⁶ Yet, indigenous agency and the manner in which African populations shaped the colonial project have yet to attract the same attention in the historiography.¹⁷ It is here that this article seeks to reorient our understanding of the relationship between the *Kaiserreich* and its empire in southern Africa. The principle objective is to expose the other side of colonial domination—specifically, how the Witbooi Namaqua influenced the evolution of German imperial rule in DSWA between 1884 and 1894.¹⁸ A focus on the Witbooi Namaqua illustrates the prominent role of Africans in German colonial history and reveals how peoples in distant places like Windhoek and Otjimbingwe manipulated German efforts to control and exploit the colony.

¹⁵Notable recent works include Edward Ross Dickinson, “The German Empire: An Empire?,” *History Workshop Journal* 66, no. 1 (2008): 129–62; Birthe Kundrus, “Die Kolonien—‘Kinder des Gefühls und der Phantasie,’” in *Phantasiereiche. Zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kolonialismus*, ed. Birthe Kundrus (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 2003), 7–18; Jens Jaeger, “Colony as *Heimat*? The Formation of Colonial Identity in Germany around 1900,” *German History* 27, no. 4 (2009): 467–89; Matthew Fitzpatrick, *Liberal Imperialism: Expansionism and Nationalism, 1848–1884* (New York: Berghahn, 2008); Krista O’Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin, eds., *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

¹⁶See esp. Geoff Eley, “Empire by Land or Sea?,” in *German Colonialism in a Global Age*, ed. Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 19–45; Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im deutschen Kaiserreich* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009); Andreas Eckert, *Herrschen und Verwalten. Afrikanische Bürokraten, Staatliche Ordnung und Politik in Tansania, 1920–1970* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007); idem, “Afrikanische Nationalisten und die Frage der Menschenrechte,” in *Moralpolitik: Geschichte der Menschenrechte im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010), 312–36; Jeff Bowersox, “Boy’s and Girl’s Own Empires: Gender and the Uses of the Colonial World in *Kaiserreich* Youth Magazines,” in *German Colonialism and National Identity*, ed. Michael Perraudin and Jürgen Zimmerer (New York: Routledge, 2011), 57–68; David Ciarlo, “Picturing Genocide in German Consumer Culture, 1904–10,” in *German Colonialism and National Identity*, ed. Michael Perraudin and Jürgen Zimmerer (New York: Routledge, 2011), 69–89; Dörte Lerp, *Imperiale Grenzräume. Bevölkerungspolitik in Deutsch-Südwestafrika und den östlichen Provinzen Preußens 1884–1914* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2016).

¹⁷Notable exceptions include the classic works by Helmut Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894–1914* (Berlin: Leibniz-Verlag, 1968), and Drechsler, “*Let Us Die Fighting*.” More recent studies that emphasize African agency include Alvin Kienetz, “The Key Role of the Orlam Migrations in the Early Europeanization of South-West Africa (Namibia),” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 10, no. 4 (1977): 553–72; Jan-Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes: Socio-Political History of Namibia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999); Tilman Dederich, “Hendrik Witbooi, the Prophet,” *Kleio* 25 (1993): 54–78; Philipp Prein, “Guns and Top Hats: African Resistance in German Southwest Africa, 1907–1915,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20, no. 1 (March 1994): 99–121; Nils Oremann, *Mission, Church and State Relations in South West Africa under German Rule (1884–1915)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1999); Michelle Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014); Sara Pugnach, *Africa in Translation: A History of Colonial Linguistics in Germany and Beyond, 1814–1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012); George Steinmetz, *Devil’s Handwriting*.

¹⁸The first ten years of German colonial rule (1884–1894) in DSWA constituted the formative colonial period. Bismarck designated Southwest Africa a *Schutzgebiet* (protectorate) in April 1884, and Germany’s first war against Witbooi ended in September 1894.

As Witbooi unmasked the realities of colonial life to settlers, German officials grew more determined to neutralize non-compliant African populations and increasingly relied on the colonial *Schutztruppe* (protection force) to impose their policies. It is not the intention of this article to suggest that Africans made their own conditions worse through acts of resistance. Colonialism was an inherently violent enterprise that pressed entire societies into slavery, economic dependence, and cultural ruin.¹⁹ The conduct, practice, and rationale for imperialism may have differed from empire to empire, but all colonial powers pursued their national goals without the consent of colonized populations. It is also important to recognize that the Witbooi Namaqua were not the only group that challenged German imperial occupation.²⁰ Many communities fought against German supremacy in Africa between 1884 and 1915. In fact, opposition to foreign rule was so relentless in DSWA that German administrators never gained full control of the colony until after Lothar von Trotha carried out the first genocide of the twentieth century.²¹

Instead, the aim of this article is to counter the persistent narrative that misrepresents colonized populations as passive victims in the face of German domination. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler remind us that European colonial powers “were neither monolithic nor omnipotent.”²² They balanced a myriad of political agendas, economic strategies, and systems of control to maintain power in their respective empires. Germany’s occupation of Southwest Africa exemplifies this argument in several notable ways. First, the appearance of German officials in DSWA did not immediately transform the political and social dynamics of the colony into one that favored the colonial government.²³ Even after the first contingent of imperial soldiers in the *Schutztruppe* arrived in 1889, most local Africans, as well as resident German missionary associations, still regarded the Witbooi Namaqua as the most powerful society in southern Damaraland.²⁴ Second, imperial leaders were at a loss over how to confront and overcome the persistent challenges to their authority. Witbooi’s refusal to accept German rule, along with his stubborn efforts to spread the Namaqua’s authority into central and northern Damaraland in particular, induced policy makers to consider a wide range of strategies. German officials not only tried diplomatic outreach and bribery, but also issued blanket threats—all in an attempt to pressure Witbooi to submit peacefully. When those policies failed, they sanctioned the use of armed aggression to drive the Namaqua from power. As more soldiers and military equipment landed in the colony, the role of the imperial regime grew in size and scope. The

¹⁹Patrick Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

²⁰Along with the Witbooi Namaqua, the Herero were among the most powerful communities that challenged German supremacy in DSWA. Under the leadership of Maharero and later his son, Samuel Maharero, the Herero occasionally cooperated with German administrators during the early colonial period. They also influenced German imperial decisions after 1884, but this article engages exclusively with the Witbooi Namaqua. The intention here is not to downplay the historical importance of the Herero just to elevate the regional status of the Namaqua, but to emphasize the formative links between colony and metropole that existed before the genocide and racial segregation of the early twentieth century.

²¹Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft*.

²²Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 6.

²³Gewald, *Towards Redemption*, 38.

²⁴Vereinte Evangelische Mission (VEM)/Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG) 1.404, Johannes Olpp, “Beitrag zur Missionsgeschichte des Witbooi Stammes,” 1897.

financial commitment these efforts demanded of the metropole far surpassed what imperial enthusiasts had promised members of the *Reichstag* and of other prominent delegations from Germany. This fact, in addition to the colony's dismal economic situation in the formative period of imperial rule, prompted colonial leaders to rely on the metropole for most of their regulatory and military needs.²⁵

Though colonialism was a controversial issue in the *Kaiserreich*, the increased attention given to Africa in newspapers and political speeches elevated the Witbooi Namaqua's acts of resistance into a national story. As calls to suppress them grew louder in the colonial and national press, the German government moved to expand its role in southern Africa, culminating in its declaration of DSWA as a settlement colony in March 1893. In the span of nearly ten years, what had started as a minor commercial enterprise in a faraway African territory had grown into an important extension of the German state. Witbooi played a significant role in this political transformation: his refusal to accept German authority forced colonial officers to confront their administrative limitations in the colony and to question the purpose behind imperial rule in southern Africa. Most significant, however, Witbooi shattered the illusion of German cultural superiority. After 1884, settlers and colonial officials quickly discovered that they could not govern merely on the basis of their national convictions or sense of adventure. When the façade of imperial fantasy gave way to colonial reality, German policy makers realized that they needed to increase the scope of the colonial government to subdue the Namaqua. African resistance compelled imperial authorities to react with military force, a response that only a small minority celebrated in Germany. In spite of its controversial reception, however, armed aggression emerged, by the turn of the twentieth century, as the principal instrument that colonial authorities used to defend their African empire.

The following section provides a short biographical account of Witbooi and his relationship with Protestant missionaries before the start of the formal colonial period. It also focuses on how he engaged with German officers and foreign dignitaries during the first years of Germany's imperial presence in Southwest Africa. The subsequent section details the political evolution of DSWA between 1884 and 1894. In particular, it scrutinizes how Witbooi's pursuit of regional hegemony inclined German leaders to expand their imperial mission in the colony. The section emphasizes the appointments of *Landeshauptmann* Curt von François and Governor Theodor Leutwein as critical examples of Witbooi's impact on colonial policy, as well as the colonial administration's embrace of nationalism and military violence to attain German supremacy in DSWA.

“A Character Who Makes History”

In August 1894, the popular Berlin newspaper *Berliner neueste Nachrichten* wrote that Witbooi was “a character who makes history ... much like Napoleon Bonaparte.”²⁶ Long before German newspapers compared him to Napoleon, Witbooi had already evolved into a central figure in Southwest Africa. He was born in the Cape Colony near Pella on the

²⁵Financial capital was in short supply after the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft für Südwestafrika* (South West Africa Company, DKGfSWA) lost a majority of its investments in 1885–1886. Though this corporate firm included some of the wealthiest people in Germany, few were eager to support a colonial agenda that did not yield profits. See Drechsler, “*Let Us Die Fighting*,” 32–35.

²⁶Bundesarchiv-Berlin (BArchB), Reichskolonialamt (RKA) 1001/1486, *Berliner Neueste Nachrichten*, Aug. 29, 1894.

Orange River in 1830.²⁷ At the time of his birth, (Kido) David Witbooi, Hendrik's grandfather, served as chief of the Namaqua.²⁸ David Witbooi was the first leader to establish a permanent Namaqua settlement north of the Orange River in Southwest Africa, beginning in the mid-1840s (Fig. 1). He eventually led his people to Gibeon (south-central Namibia) in 1863 and developed a communalist society centered on cattle, trade, and Christianity.²⁹ After his death in 1875, (Kido) Moses Witbooi, Hendrik's father, assumed the chieftaincy and remained in that position until 1883. Like his father, Moses Witbooi followed Christian practices and worked closely with Johannes Olpp, a Protestant missionary affiliated with the *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft* (Rhenish Mission Society, RMG) who arrived in Gibeon in 1868.³⁰ Moses Witbooi supported Olpp's efforts to build a church and mission station, and also helped found an RMG school in the settlement.

Hendrik Witbooi came of age in this culturally and socially diverse environment. The third of five children, he devoted himself to Christianity in his adolescence. Missionary Olpp baptized Witbooi and his wife in 1868, an experience that Hendrik later described as the most important moment in his life.³¹ Olpp also celebrated Witbooi's embrace of Christianity, later noting in a report to his superiors that the Namaqua were spiritually identical to Europeans. (He eventually used his personal association with the Witbooi Namaqua to develop a general critique of European colonialism in the years immediately after German unification.³²) After his baptism, Witbooi enrolled in Gibeon's mission school, where he learned German and acquired knowledge of a variety of trades, including carpentry and other artisanal practices.³³ He became a church elder in 1875 and used his position to serve the Protestant community in the region. At the same time, he vowed to act in terms of divine revelation and to abjure all non-Christian principles that, he feared, might undermine his political and religious destiny.³⁴ Though Witbooi eventually vacated his position as a church elder in 1883, he remained a deeply devout man throughout his entire life.³⁵

In June 1884, Witbooi began the first of several treks north into central Damaraland in search of a new settlement for the Namaqua. He styled himself a biblical prophet and gained the support of the most prominent families in Gibeon. That same year, Witbooi established a settlement at Hoornkrans, an important stronghold in territory controlled by the

²⁷See the *Kirchenbuch Gibeon* collection at the Archives of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church (ELC) in Windhoek, Namibia. Brigitte Lau remains the leading authority on Witbooi's early life. See her "The Oppressed as Oppressors—Unsolved Issues of Namibian Historiography," in *Africa Seminar Collected Papers*, ed. A. Spiegel (Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, 1985).

²⁸Gewald, *Towards Redemption*, 26–27.

²⁹Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*, 112.

³⁰Missionaries Carl Hugo Hahn, Franz Heinrich Kleinschmidt, and Hans Christian Knudsen first arrived in Klein Namaqualand in May 1842. See Carl Hugo Hahn, *Tagbücher, 1837–1860. Diaries: A Missionary in Nama- and Damaraland, Part I: 1837–1845*, ed. Brigitte Lau (Windhoek: Windhoek Archives, 1984), 77–78; Lau, *Witbooi Papers*, 196.

³¹Witbooi's wife's name was Katharina (!Nanses). See "20. Witbooi an J. Olpp," Jan. 3, 1890, in Witbooi, *Afrika den Afrikanern!*, 73–77.

³²"Zur Charakteristik der Namas (Namaquas)," *Berichte der RMG* 32 (3, 1876): 78, in Steinmetz, *Devil's Handwriting*, 119.

³³Lau, *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*, iii.

³⁴"20. Witbooi an Olpp," Jan. 3, 1890, in Witbooi, *Afrika den Afrikanern!*, 73–77.

³⁵Johannes Olpp, "Beitrag zur Geschichte des Witbooi-Stammes, für die Barmer Missionsgesellschaft," in Witbooi, *Afrika den Afrikanern!*, iii. Also see Gustav Menzel, *Widerstand und Gottesfurcht. Hendrik Witbooi—eine Biographie in zeitgenössischen Quellen* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe, 2000).

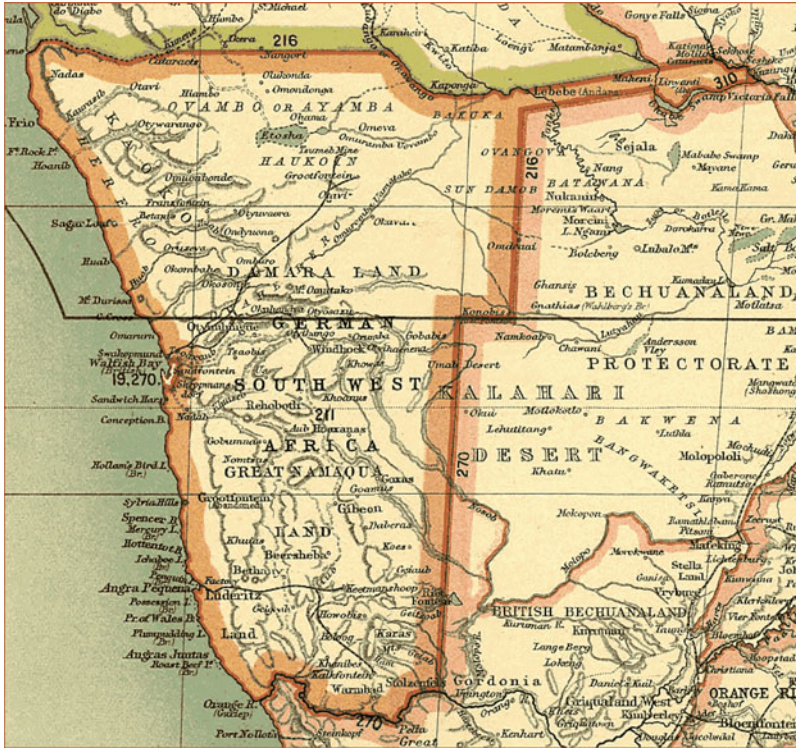


Fig. 1. Map of German Southwest Africa in 1909. Source: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

Herero, a powerful Bantu community under the leadership of Chief Maharero.³⁶ Witbooi’s decision to expand his influence into Hoorankrans initiated a protracted military conflict between both peoples. Several months before this conflict began, however, Maharero had finalized a protection agreement with officials from the newly arrived German colonial administration. Though he was aware of Maharero’s treaty with Germany, Witbooi never wavered in his decision to confront the Herero (Fig. 2).

In many respects, Witbooi’s campaign against Maharero was the first example of his total disregard for German authority.³⁷ At no time did the supposed threat of the German military dissuade him from seizing land, cattle, and trade rights from the Herero in Damaraland.³⁸ Witbooi also clashed with other African communities that were under the auspices of German protection, which gradually weakened the colonial administration’s political mandate in the colony. The violent encounters between the Witbooi Namaqua and rival

³⁶Hendrik Witbooi’s father, Moses, remained the official leader of the Witbooi Namaqua until his death in 1888. But his advanced age and ill health inspired a majority of the Namaqua to support Hendrik’s efforts to replace his father as chief. See Lau, *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*, 196.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 34.

³⁸Drechsler argues that Germany’s inability to protect the Herero in this period eventually convinced Samuel Maharero, Paramount Chief of the Herero, to cancel his treaty with Germany. See Drechsler, “*Let Us Die Fighting!*,” 33–34.



Fig. 2. Captain Hendrik Witbooi with rifle, ca. 1900. Source: BArch Bild 105-DSWA1035, Deutsch-Südwestafrika (DSWA).

African communities in the mid-1880s were, in fact, a significant problem for the German imperial government. Above all, instability threatened German economic interests: if colonial administrators could not guarantee stakeholders a return on their investments, commercial and industrial firms had little incentive to “modernize” the protectorate. Moreover, prolonged conflict discouraged potential German settlers from making the long voyage to southern Africa. German leaders therefore sought to bring an immediate end to the conflict between the Herero and Witbooi Namaqua.

In June 1886, *Reichskommissar* Göring wrote Witbooi, encouraging him to end his “hostile actions” in the colony. “Act reasonably,” he implored, “realize that the best course is to return home and live in peace with your old father and your tribe. The German government cannot permit chieftains, who have placed themselves under German protection, to support your enterprise of plunging a protected chiefdom into

war. ... I trust you will attend to my words.”³⁹ Witbooi simply ignored this message and continued his campaign for supremacy against the Herero. Later that same year, he received a letter from Louis Nels, a deputy officer in the service of Göring. Nels invited Witbooi to participate in a conciliatory meeting between the various warring communities in Walvis Bay, where imperial authorities hoped to facilitate a peace treaty.⁴⁰ In his response, Witbooi chose instead to remind Nels of the political power dynamic in the colony. “I understand that you want to negotiate peace,” he wrote, “you who call yourself a ‘deputy.’ How shall I respond? You are someone else’s representative and I am a free and autonomous man who only answers to God. I have nothing further to say to you. A deputy is less powerful, so I have decided not to comply with your request.”⁴¹ Once again, neither Göring nor Nels responded to Witbooi’s diplomatic reproach. With the limits of German power on full display, imperial officials were at a loss about how to end the violence in DSWA. Göring may have understood this reality better than anyone. In June 1888, he wrote Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and described the overall situation as “not very encouraging.”⁴²

Colonial leaders initially had few options to enact imperial policy in DSWA. With no sizable German settler community or *Schutztruppe* to enforce their declarations, administrators could do little on the ground to stabilize the military state of affairs.⁴³ In spite of these limitations, colonial officers responded to Witbooi with blanket threats and open challenges to his authority. Göring, in particular, never concealed his disdain for the so-called Hottentot Chief.⁴⁴ He chastised Witbooi in private letters to superiors, colleagues, and journalists, as well as in his personal diplomatic exchanges. On one such occasion, for example, he reprimanded Witbooi as “a rebel” and warned that, “in civilized countries, he would be dealt with accordingly.”⁴⁵ In April 1889, Göring went so far as to threaten open war if Witbooi did not halt his attacks against groups allied with Germany. “The German government,” he warned, “can no longer tolerate your constant threats—again and again—against territories and peoples that are under German protection. We shall endeavor to prevent [your attacks] with every means at our disposal” (Fig. 3).⁴⁶

While Göring threatened warfare, Witbooi adopted a strict diplomatic approach with German officials. In addition, he reached out to other European powers and tried to emphasize the inherent contradictions underlying German imperial directives. Witbooi’s prior relationships with Protestant missionaries and European traders helped him gain access to foreign embassies and international media outlets. In a letter to the British magistrate in Walvis Bay in August 1892, for instance, Witbooi accused the German government of the very crime that

³⁹Göring, “Göring an Witbooi,” in David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 50.

⁴⁰Walvis Bay was an extension of the British-controlled Cape Colony in 1884.

⁴¹Witbooi, “Witbooi an Nels,” Sept. 27, 1886, in Olusoga and Erichsen, *The Kaiser’s Holocaust*, 50. Also see Drechsler, “*Let Us Die Fighting*,” 34.

⁴²“Göring an Bismarck,” June 21, 1888, in Drechsler, “*Let Us Die Fighting*,” 34.

⁴³The first contingent of *Schutztruppen* did not arrive in DSWA until 1889.

⁴⁴Boer settlers perceived the Khoikhoi’s click language as a linguistic stammer and used the term *Hottentot* (stutters) to refer to the entire group. German colonialists later adopted the term and embraced its derogatory connotations.

⁴⁵Göring, “8. Göring an Witbooi,” Nov. 21, 1885, in *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*, ed. Annemarie Heywood and Eben Maasdrorp (Windhoek: Springwell Books, 1990), 11–12.

⁴⁶Göring, “24a. Göring an Witbooi,” May 20, 1890, in Witbooi, *Afrika den Afrikanem!*, 85.



Fig. 3. Dr. Heinrich Ernst Göring as *Reichskommissar*. Source: Public Domain.

protection treaties supposedly promised to avert. “After what I have heard and seen since the arrival of the Germans,” he asserted, “it seems to me that the German himself is that powerful man who wants to invade our country. ... He rules autocratically, enforcing his own laws. Right and truth do not interest him.”⁴⁷ Witbooi was well aware of contemporary European geopolitical rivalries. He reasoned that, if he could gain diplomatic support from Great Britain, Germany’s most prominent European competitor in southern Africa, colonial authorities could no longer pursue their imperial goals without risking a larger war with the British Empire. It was in this manner that Witbooi manipulated “Great Power” politics to benefit his own pursuit of independence and supremacy in Southwest Africa.

In an effort to broaden his appeal even further, Witbooi underscored his knowledge of the Bible and regularly cited Christian teachings when engaging German leaders and European diplomats. After Maharero had negotiated a new treaty with the colonial administration in 1890, for example, Witbooi compared his situation to Christ after Herod and Pontius Pilate had forged an alliance to “get the Lord Jesus out of the way.”⁴⁸ On those occasions when the colonial administration published his correspondence, European audiences were able to gain a greater familiarity with Witbooi and understanding of the convictions underlying his resistance to colonial authority. Witbooi was careful to amend his style and tone in his correspondence with Europeans. In May 1890, for instance, he castigated Göring for his refusal to treat the Namaqua as a free and independent people. “How you raise such great, weighty, and grave topics in your letter astonishes me,” Witbooi wrote.

⁴⁷ Witbooi, “68. Witbooi an die Engländer in Walfischbucht,” Aug. 4, 1892, in *ibid.*, 143–48.

⁴⁸ Witbooi, “26. Witbooi an Maharero,” May 30, 1890, in *ibid.*, 91–92. Also see Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft*, 29.

“You have not left me room to ponder all in my heart, so that I might answer you from my own good judgment and free choice. Moreover, you have not approached me as an impartial peacemaker, but instead uttered abrupt orders as to what I should do.”⁴⁹ Though forceful throughout his letter, Witbooi pleaded for tolerance and mutual respect. He championed Göring as “his friend” and expressed a desire “to live in mutual understanding.” “I say all this not in arrogance or as a challenge,” Witbooi closed, “but only because I cannot put the matter in any other way.”⁵⁰ Witbooi hoped that the inflection of his words and the validity of his arguments might convince German authorities to extend him a free hand in Southwest Africa. To the contrary, his successful resistance only prompted policymakers to seek immediate solutions to the instability in DSWA. As a result, Germany’s military presence in the colony began to grow exponentially after 1889.

This correspondence demonstrated Witbooi’s decisive role in Germany’s formative colonial history. His diplomatic and military skill obliged imperial leaders to search for new ways to stabilize DSWA politically. Moreover, Witbooi’s engagement with foreign diplomats and Protestant missionaries often allowed him to dictate his motives in terms that European audiences understood—namely, religious freedom, national determination, and foreign intrusion. A variety of factors informed German imperial strategy in the 1880s, including financial constraints, regional and international trade agreements, European colonial rivalries, German domestic politics, as well as the growth of anti-colonial movements after the turn of the twentieth century. Witbooi, however, compelled German leaders to recognize the pre-eminent station of African peoples in the colony. In this way, he not only exposed the inaccuracies of European pre-colonial beliefs, but also pressed German administrators to centralize and expand their occupation of DSWA.

The appearance of a small contingent of colonial *Schutztruppe* under the command of Captain Curt von François in 1889 was the first sign of such expansion.⁵¹ Though the military situation in DSWA remained a significant problem after their arrival, the presence of German soldiers revealed that Witbooi had provoked German authorities to act decisively. As colonial and foreign media outlets focused more attention on developments in the colony, the suppression of Witbooi increasingly became a national story. The following section traces the ramifications of this development from the start of German colonial occupation in 1884 to Witbooi’s defeat in September 1894. In particular, it emphasizes two significant moments in Germany’s formative colonial history: Chancellor Leo von Caprivi’s decision to designate DSWA a German settler-colony, and Kaiser Wilhelm II’s respective appointments of Curt von François as *Landeshauptmann* and Theodor Leutwein as colonial governor. These events expanded the size and scope of the imperial project in southern Africa and made Witbooi a fierce adversary of German interests in the colony.

⁴⁹Witbooi, “25. Witbooi an Göring,” May 29, 1890, in Witbooi, *Afrika den Afrikanem!*, 86.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Susanne Kuss, *German Colonial Wars and the Context of Military Violence*, trans. Andrew Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 80–87.

Perception and Policy:
From “Relentless Severity” to the “Leutwein System”

The same year that Witbooi began his treks north into central Damaraland, Adolf Lüderitz arrived on the shores of Southwest Africa. A forty-nine-year-old tobacco merchant from Bremen, Lüderitz was in search of territory where he could expand his business prospects and stimulate colonial enthusiasts in Germany to support overseas expansion. In 1883 he attained monopoly rights over Angra Pequena (Lüderitzbucht) and all the land south to the Orange River.⁵² Given the limited scope of Lüderitz's operation, most Germans initially took little notice of his territorial acquisitions, including most senior members of the *Reichstag*. Even after Bismarck proclaimed Lüderitz's territorial possessions a *Schutzgebiet* (protectorate) the next year, Germany's political leadership wanted to limit their imperial commitment to Southwest Africa and keep state costs at a minimum.⁵³ This desire prompted the creation of the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft für Südwestafrika* (German Colonial Society for Southwest Africa, DKGfSWA), a corporate firm comprised of notable German bankers, industrialists, merchants, and politicians.⁵⁴ While the German government retained control over political affairs in the new protectorate, the DKGfSWA assumed a majority of the financial obligations.⁵⁵ In return, the *Reichstag* granted corporate investors monopoly control over all private enterprise in DSWA.⁵⁶ German imperial conquest thus began not as an enterprise undertaken by men in search of adventure and the glory of empire, but instead as an economic venture backed by a small cadre of wealthy bankers, land speculators, and mining executives.

Colonial expansion, even into a region “whose economic value was debatable,” nevertheless raised greater social awareness about the protectorate and its potential for the German nation.⁵⁷ Though the vast majority of citizens had nothing to gain personally from the DKGfSWA and its operations overseas, colonial supporters believed that the future of Germany's entire imperial project was at stake in the deserts of Southwest Africa. Organizations like the *Gesellschaft für Deutsche Kolonialisierung* (Society for German Colonization, GDK) and the DKG promoted colonial conquest as a national cause and encouraged German citizens to unify under the banner of imperial domination. “The sails of Germany's foreign policy must be swelled with fresh determination and with the same national enthusiasm when it comes to advancing our colonial enterprises,” the DKZ proclaimed in July 1889. “We must stand together in colonial issues that affect the entire nation.”⁵⁸ The Program for the GDK was even more direct:

⁵²Heinrich Loth, “Die Konzessionsperiode,” in *Die christliche Mission in Südwestafrika: Zur destruktiven Rolle der Rheinischen Missionsgesellschaft beim Prozess der Staatsbildung in Südwestafrika (1842–1895)* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1963), 97. Also see Max Ewald Baericke, *Lüderitzbucht 1908–1914. Historische Erinnerungen eines Diamantensuchers an die Zeit von 1908–1914 in Lüderitzbucht, Südwestafrika* (Namibia Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft: Windhoek, 2001), 19–22.

⁵³Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft*, 3–15; Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*, 81–114.

⁵⁴The DKGfSWA's most prominent members included the notable German bankers Gerson von Bleichröder and Adolph von Hansemann; Count Guido Henckel von Donnersmarck, a successful industrialist; and Johannes von Miquel, the mayor of Frankfurt am Main.

⁵⁵BarchB, RKA 1001/1532, “Bericht an des Kaisers und Königs Majestät,” April 12, 1885.

⁵⁶BarchB, RKA 1001/1522, “Statut der Deutschen Colonial-Gesellschaft für Südwest-Afrika,” April 7, 1885.

⁵⁷Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft*, 3.

⁵⁸Barch, RKA 1001/1135, “Fürst Bismarck und die deutsche Kolonialpolitik,” *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, July 6, 1889.

For centuries, a heavy stream of German emigration flowed across the borders of the empire into foreign lands. In every land and among all peoples, it was the Germans who have, in outstanding numbers, taken part in the great cultural task of civilizing and cultivating our earth. ... Germandom across the whole world begins once more to think seriously of its common fatherland, and the urge for a closer union with their countrymen at home springs everywhere to life.⁵⁹

The GDK spoke for a broad cross section of society, from rural farmers and urban industrial workers to Pan-German nationalists and colonial advocates, who were tired of émigrés “culturally fertilizing” areas of the world while forfeiting their primordial bonds to the German state.

The most significant problem for supporters of imperial expansion after 1884 was, however, Göring’s inability to control events in DSWA. Instead of stories that glorified African subjugation or accounts of economic development and growth, Witbooi’s campaign of resistance enticed journalists to portray the Namaqua as the true masters of the colony. “Up until now,” one editorial argued in September 1887, “the German protectorate of Southwest Africa has existed in name only. People are being told so many things about the might of the German Empire, but no one ever sees it put into practice. Either the German Empire makes a move to maintain its prestige, or it will have to abandon the territory it has gained. The current situation is one that should fill Germany with shame.”⁶⁰ Though German society was anything but monolithic in its support of colonial expansion, Witbooi’s provocations against his African rivals, his diplomatic outreach to foreign embassies, and his total disregard for German authority galvanized enthusiasts on both sides of the issue. Detractors of imperial conquest cited the financial obligations of perpetual war against a determined enemy, whereas proponents argued that Witbooi was a significant threat to imperial rule and thus required a greater commitment from the German state. In turn, public perception of colonial rule increasingly turned into a national debate, as reports on DSWA proliferated throughout the metropole.⁶¹

The culmination of this national debate occurred when Chancellor von Caprivi proclaimed DSWA a German settlement colony in March 1893. “We do not intend to make war,” he announced before the *Reichstag*, “but wish to become masters of the country and to consolidate our sovereignty without bloodshed. We possess Southwest Africa once and for all; it is *German territory* and we must preserve it as such” [emphasis not in original].⁶² Though Caprivi still aspired to keep the state’s financial obligations to a minimum, his decision affirmed in definitive terms the significance of the colony for the new German nation-state. The Witbooi Namaqua alone did not entice Caprivi to declare DSWA a settlement colony. But, more than any other factor, their persistent opposition to imperial rule pressed German officials to confront the consequences of imperialism. In addition, their persistent attacks on African rivals demonstrated to colonial leaders that the metropole needed to provide more financial and military support to guarantee success.

⁵⁹“Program of the General German Congress,” in John Phillip Short, *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 67.

⁶⁰“Die Lage im Hererolande,” *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, Sept. 1, 1887. Also see Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*, 33.

⁶¹Short, *Magic Lantern Empire*.

⁶²*Stenographische Berichte des deutschen Reichstags (SBVdR)*, vol. 128, March 1, 1893.

Kaiser Wilhelm II's decision to promote Curt von François to *Landeshauptmann* in November 1893 was the first demonstration of Germany's newfound commitment to colonial governance. Before this appointment, François had served both as a paid mercenary for King Leopold II in the Belgian Congo and as a commanding officer in the colonial *Schutztruppe* (Fig. 4).⁶³ A fanatical racist, François looked at Witbooi as a mere "tribesman" whom he could defeat with relative ease. "The Europeans have failed to give the black man the right kind of treatment," he wrote after his arrival.⁶⁴ "They made too many concessions," he continued, "granting all his wishes without bearing in mind that this is only interpreted as a sign of weakness. Nothing but relentless severity will lead to success."⁶⁵ François soon discovered, however, that the Witbooi Namaqua controlled vast herds of cattle and rich expanses of territory, that they had reliable access to vital resources such as water and foodstuffs, and that they possessed state-of-the-art weaponry and ammunition. Moreover, his responsibility as *Landeshauptmann* required him to consider the totality of governance and not just military affairs. On the one hand, he understood that the colony's potential was tied to cattle farming, agricultural exports, and local commercial development. If DSWA was ever to become a rich and marketable colony, future German settlers needed African laborers to work on their behalf. François feared that any war with Witbooi could endanger the postwar economic stability of the region.⁶⁶ On the other hand, he believed that if the power dynamic in DSWA did not soon change, Germany's presence in southern Africa might altogether disappear.

François eventually pursued the only course of action that he understood. "Only serious, strong-minded, and domineering actions against foreign nations, as well as quick diplomacy and successes in battle," he later wrote, "could excite the support of the German people."⁶⁷ In August 1889, he submitted a request for military reinforcements and weaponry from Berlin: "I consider it a matter of urgent necessity to bring the force to a strength of fifty men, to equip it with the latest small-bore repeating rifles, and to make available a cannon complete with one hundred shells and fifty shrapnels."⁶⁸ While waiting for his soldiers, François arranged to meet with Witbooi at the Namaqua leader's headquarters in Hoornkrans. François offered to pay him an annual stipend of five thousand marks if Witbooi promised to cease his attacks against other African populations.⁶⁹ He also warned Witbooi that his campaign for supremacy stood no real chance of success. "Large numbers of Europeans will soon arrive by ship and they must be protected," François informed the Namaqua leader. "The German government is obliged to protect all who place themselves under German protection."⁷⁰ Witbooi responded with an affirmation of his sovereignty. "An independent and autonomous chief is leader of his people and land," he asserted:

⁶³ Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust*, 56.

⁶⁴ Curt von François, "François an Krauel," Oct. 29, 1889, in Drechsler, "Let Us Die Fighting," 43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ BarchB, RKA 1001/1134e, "Bemerkungen zu der Denkschrift der Deutschen Kolonial Gesellschaft: Die Ansiedlung einer Deutschen Gemeinde in Süd-West-Afrika," March 3, 1891.

⁶⁷ Werner Tabel, "Die Literatur der Kolonialzeit Südwestafrikas: Memoiren berühmter Persönlichkeiten, Teil 3: Curt von François, in *Afrikanischer Heimatkalender* (Windhoek: Informationsausschuss der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Namibia), 78.

⁶⁸ François, "François an Bismarck," Aug. 6, 1889, in Drechsler, "Let Us Die Fighting," 63 note 159.

⁶⁹ Curt von François, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika. Geschichte der Kolonisation bis zum Ausbruch des Krieges mit Witbooi* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1899), 153–54.

⁷⁰ François and Witbooi, "59. Gespräch zwischen von François und Witbooi," June 9, 1892, in Witbooi, *Afrika den Afrikanern!*, 127.



Fig. 4. *Landeshauptmann* Curt von François in military uniform. Source: Public Domain.

Every ruler is chief over his people and country. When one stands under the protection of another, the subordinate one is no longer independent [or] master of his people or country. ... We are different nations, live by different laws and customs, and come from different countries. Each chief lives with his people according to his own laws and the conditions in which they find themselves.⁷¹

Witbooi justified his resistance campaign in national terms, which not even François could refute. After the meeting, the latter acknowledged privately to Witbooi that he also “could not bear to be bossed [around].”⁷²

The meeting at Hoornkrans was a watershed moment in German colonial history. It corroborated François’s prior belief that military action was the only reliable solution to what he

⁷¹Ibid., 127–28.

⁷²François, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*, 153–54.

deemed the *Eingeborenenfrage* (native question).⁷³ He again requested more reinforcements and heavy artillery from Berlin. François also inundated German and foreign newspapers with negative accounts of the Witbooi Namaqua.⁷⁴ In spite of his preparatory efforts and other colonial propaganda, François's war against Witbooi nevertheless shocked even the most enthusiastic supporters of German imperial domination. In March 1893, 214 soldiers departed for Windhoek from Walvis Bay. François's orders to his troops were clear: "The object of this mission is to destroy the tribe of the Witbooi."⁷⁵ In the early morning hours of April 13, 1893, the *Schutztruppe* surrounded Hoornkrans and unleashed a barrage against the Witbooi Namaqua's encampment. Though Witbooi and a majority of his male soldiers escaped the encirclement, German troops killed nearly one hundred Namaqua women and children as they slept in their homes (Fig. 5).⁷⁶

Hoornkrans dominated headlines in Germany. François justified his actions against the Namaqua as militarily crucial. In interviews after the battle, he praised the "excellent non-commissioned officers and riders for Germany's victory," and portrayed the *Schutztruppe* as the only barrier between "civilization and savagery."⁷⁷ The *Kölnische Zeitung*, a prominent daily newspaper in Germany, published the account of a soldier who had fought alongside François at Hoornkrans. "After three days' march," he explained, "we camped in a valley of tangled rocks on [April] 11. It was here that our captain told us that he had decided to destroy the Hendrik Witbooi tribe."⁷⁸ "Children," François instructed, "they are fifty meters in front—you have what it takes!"⁷⁹ Another article made a similar claim about François's leadership: "The German government gave Major François the [necessary] teams to get the desired result; the national government, therefore, has no reason to criticize his actions."⁸⁰ Witbooi offered his own account of the assault in a letter to John J. Cleverly, the British magistrate in Walvis Bay, in which he condemned Kaiser Wilhelm II for

sending his soldiers to Africa to kill innocent women and children. ... I did not think that so great a power in men and ammunition and [so] mighty a captain of a civilized power would make war with such a smart, disesteemed people as mine. ... To steal upon me in my sleep—the little children and women and men [François] has murdered. I [previously] could not think this [possible] of a white man.⁸¹

Witbooi's depiction of the attack on Hoornkrans offered a powerful alternative to François's patriotic narrative, and his descriptions of murdered women and children brought home the violence of war to Germans living in the metropole.

The portrayal of the "massacre at Hoornkrans" in the colonial and German press had a chilling effect in Germany. Instead of a land of economic freedom and national promise,

⁷³BarchB, RKA 1001/1486, "The Hottentot Power. Fighting in the North-West," *Cape Times*, April 18, 1892.

⁷⁴François, *Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*, 155–57.

⁷⁵François, "François an AAKA," April 12, 1893, in Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*, 70.

⁷⁶Franz Joseph von Bülow, *Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Drei Jahre im Lande Hendrik Witboois. Schilderungen von Land und Leuten* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1896), 286–88.

⁷⁷BarchB, RKA 1001/1483, "Bericht an die AAKA," Aug. 14, 1893.

⁷⁸BarchB, RKA 1001/1483, "Africa," *Kölnische Zeitung*, April 16, 1893.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰BarchB, RKA 1001/1484, "Südwestafrika," *Vossische Zeitung*, Nov. 9, 1893.

⁸¹BarchB, RKA 1001/1483, "Bericht vom Hoornkranz," April 20, 1893. The British Magistrate translated this source.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 137-003182
Foto: Rohrbach | 1900/1914 ca.

Fig. 5. German soldiers with a rapid-fire weapon. Source: BArch Bild 137-003182, Paul Rohrbach, ca. 1900/1914.

DSWA now looked like a place where German authorities sanctioned the murder of innocent women and children. Individuals already skeptical about the colony's economic potential were quick to cite the human cost and financial burdens of continuous warfare overseas.⁸² Those nervous about Germany's reputation after the massacre pointed out that Witbooi had evaded capture and now posed a greater threat to German imperial ambitions than at any previous time since 1884. Many also expressed fears that François could no longer confine the war to German colonial soil. The *Vossische Zeitung*, a popular liberal newspaper published in Berlin, cited the arrival of the British warship *Maggie* in Walvis Bay as a cause for great concern. François's actions, the paper concluded, have done nothing but "attract more circles to the troubles in DSWA."⁸³ His failure to capture Witbooi and the torrent of negative press in the aftermath of Hoornkrans eventually led Kaiser Wilhelm II to appoint Theodor Leutwein as governor of DSWA in April 1894.

Even in defeat, Witbooi altered the dynamics of Germany's colonial project in southern Africa. The human cost of victory prompted the dismissal of François and also created a public desire to revisit the purpose of German rule in Africa—though François's violent conduct alone did not compel German officers to seek a new strategy in DSWA. Kaiser Wilhelm's decision to remove him as governor nevertheless demonstrates that events in the colony had a clear impact on political policy in the metropole. Colonial officials desired peace and stability above all else—but not at the cost of hundreds of lives, regardless of whether they were German or African ones.⁸⁴ François's effort to forge a "peace of the

⁸²BarchB, RKA 1001/1483, John J. Cleverly, "Hostilities between Germans and Hottentots," May 9, 1893.

⁸³BarchB, RKA 1001/1483, *Vossische Zeitung*, Aug. 22, 1893.

⁸⁴This argument stands in direct contrast to that made by scholars who maintain that the roots of the Holocaust extend to German colonial policy in DSWA. Though supporters of the "von Windhuk nach Auschwitz" thesis look to the Herero-Namaqua genocide to bolster claims of genocidal continuity,

graveyard” also had a disastrous impact on German migration, as it suggested that the colony was dangerous and inhospitable to Europeans. If prospective German colonialists chose to forgo settlement in DSWA in favor of emigration to the United States, officials reasoned, the entire purpose of the colony would fail.

Investors and large companies affiliated with the DKGfSWA were among the most vocal critics of the attack on Hoornkrans. Though the colonial administration planned to transform DSWA into a settler colony, private concession firms still owned a majority of the territory in 1893.⁸⁵ In order to recoup their losses, German firms increased sales of their property to the imperial government. As a result, the financial needs of DSWA increasingly fell under the auspices of the colonial administration.⁸⁶ After Leutwein assumed official control in April 1894, he used this newfound authority to reshape the entire political and social structures of the colony.⁸⁷ He favored an economy that supported plantation-style estates and affluent German settlers, analogous to the socioeconomic system in contemporary Prussia.⁸⁸ Leutwein claimed that well-propertied Germans stood a better chance overseas than “the lonely white farmer who can easily enter into concubinage with a native woman.”⁸⁹ He also sought to expand the power of the German colonial administration. Though he always maintained that the “personal needs of settlers [should] be taken into account,” Leutwein privately doubted that a large-scale settlement program could succeed without the support of a powerful colonial government.⁹⁰

Before his plans could come to fruition, Leutwein recognized that he first needed to reconcile Germany's relationship with Witbooi. In stark contrast to his predecessor, Leutwein favored diplomacy and negotiation over military action. In February 1894, Leutwein wrote to Witbooi about François's dismissal and expressed his desire to establish a lasting peace between Germany and the Namaqua: “In consideration of the gallantry shown by yourself and your men, I hope to work out favorable conditions, if you will cooperate in this final chance to put an end to the bloodshed.”⁹¹ Three months later, Leutwein explained that “Germans do not intend to wage war against your people, [but instead] wish to work together in peace with you. I therefore hope that your people will accept my pledge that they may return to their homes with my permission.”⁹² In his reply, Witbooi congratulated

neither the German government nor the public believed that mass killing was a reasonable solution to colonial instability. Compare Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz*; Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz.”

⁸⁵Daniel Joseph Walther, *Creating Germans Abroad: Cultural Policies and National Identity in Namibia* (Athen: Ohio University Press, 2002), 12–14. Also see Gesine Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewußtsein. Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkriegs in Namibia. 1904 bis 1907* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 9–27; Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft*, 15–30.

⁸⁶Though their influence waned as the colonial administration assumed more territory and political control, private companies continued to operate with significant power in DSWA up to the start of World War I. Several firms retained their investments and later expanded their regional control after the conclusion of the German–Herero–Namaqua war (“*Herero Aufstand*”) in 1908.

⁸⁷Leutwein arrived in DSWA in January 1894, but did not officially begin his duties as governor until April 1894. See Drechsler, “*Let Us Die Fighting!*,” 74.

⁸⁸Theodor Leutwein, *Elf Jahre Gouverneur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler and Son, 1908), 411–12.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 412.

⁹⁰BarchB, RKA 1001/1138, *Ansiedlung insbesondere deutscher Bauern in Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, Leutwein, “*Berichte an die Auswärtiges Amt—Kolonial Abteilung*,” June 13, 1903.

⁹¹Leutwein, “110. Leutwein an Witbooi,” Feb. 9, 1894, in *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*, ed. Brigitte Lau (Windhoek: National Archive of Namibia, 1989), 121–23.

⁹²Leutwein, “96b. Leutwein an Witbooi,” May 5, 1894, in Witbooi, *Afrika den Afrikanem!*, 179–80.

Leutwein on his promotion and acknowledged that renewed discussions offered a greater prospect for peace. But he also reprimanded Leutwein for what he called an “unwarranted assault against his people,” and remarked that any peace would “require more than a few minutes or a single day to arrange.”⁹³ Witbooi understood that the political dynamics in DSWA had changed after François’s attack on Hoornekran, but his convictions remained as resolute as ever. He wanted to impress upon Leutwein that the Namaqua were a proud nation whose members simply wanted to retain their cultural and political sovereignty. If Witbooi could frame his resistance campaign in national terms, he thought, Leutwein might respond as a geopolitical rival—and not as an imperial master.

The exchanges between Leutwein and Witbooi over the next five months consisted of courteous diplomatic outreach, blunt conversation about protection treaties, as well as fierce disagreement over the merits of European colonialism in Africa. Though both men never lost sight of their own respective goals, they eventually developed a strong personal bond, a fact that Leutwein later acknowledged in his memoirs (Fig. 6).⁹⁴ Though he sought peace through diplomatic overtures and negotiation, Leutwein nevertheless retained a sizeable military presence in the colony. In late August 1894, he wrote Witbooi one final time and informed him that he could no longer accept the “unstable peace” between their respective forces:

The fact that you do not want to submit to the German Empire is not a sin, nor does it make you guilty. But it is extremely dangerous for the stability of the territories currently under German protection. Therefore, my dear Captain, all further letters in which you do not offer your surrender are in vain. I do hope, however, that you will agree that the war we now face will be fought in a humane way.⁹⁵

In spite of his situation, Witbooi still refused to give in to Leutwein’s demands. He reminded Leutwein of the “massacre at Hoornekran” and asked him to consider Germany’s international reputation and the consequences that might follow another act of colonial aggression.⁹⁶ Leutwein ignored Witbooi’s council and encircled his military encampment in August 1894. Low on supplies and surrounded, Witbooi surrendered to Leutwein on September 8, 1894. Witbooi’s campaign against German colonial rule was over—at least for the immediate period.

Witbooi did more to expose the limits of German power than any other person in southern Africa.⁹⁷ His devotion to Protestantism, his skillful leadership, and his persuasive diplomacy obliged German officials to question the nature and purpose of colonial rule in Africa: Was a peace wrought by bullets an acceptable form of domination and, if so, who stood to benefit from such an imperial enterprise? The public response to the “massacre at Hoornekran” provided a clear answer to both of these queries. Kaiser Wilhelm II’s decision to embrace the so-called Leutwein system meant that the German state was financially and politically committed to DSWA. The protectorate’s evolution from a private economic boondoggle into a settlement colony was neither inevitable nor probable. Though private

⁹³ Witbooi, “97. Witbooi an Leutwein,” May 6, 1894, in *ibid.*, 180–81.

⁹⁴ Leutwein, *Elf Jahre*, 414.

⁹⁵ Leutwein, “108a. Leutwein an Witbooi,” Aug. 20, 1894, in Witbooi, *Afrika den Afrikaner!*, 197.

⁹⁶ Witbooi, “111. Witbooi an Leutwein,” Sept. 3, 1894, in *ibid.*, 199–200.

⁹⁷ BarchB, RKA 1001/1487, Theodor Leutwein, Hendrik Witbooi, et al., “Schutz und Freundschafts-Vertrag,” 12–14.



Fig. 6. Witbooi meets with Leutwein and German administrative officials in 1896 (l. to r.: Chief Samuel Isaak, Captain Hendrik Witbooi, Governor Theodor Leutwein, Major Joachim Friedrich von Heydebreck, *Bezirksamtmann* Duft, N.N. Source: BArch Bild 146–2006–0137, Deutsch-Südwestafrika, Witbooi bei dt. Verwaltungsbeamten, 1896.

firms remained essential agents for the creation of a market-based economy in the colony, profit margins were no longer the sole measure of success. As a settlement colony, DSWA served as an extension of the German state. The preservation of that reality necessitated regional stability, economic promise, and peaceful relations with indigenous African communities—conditions that only came to fruition after Witbooi's defeat in September 1894.

Conclusion

As Germans strove to distinguish themselves as citizens of a newly unified state after 1871, they did so with a profound awareness of the world beyond the European continent. Once Germany entered the “African scramble” in 1884, the colonial sphere slowly grew into an important aspect of national life. Whether in the colonies themselves, or at fairs, museums, zoological displays, and “exotic” spectacles in Berlin, Munich, and Leipzig, Germans engaged the empire and increasingly fashioned collective impressions of the *Kaiserreich* based on imperial contact. Colonial fantasies may have instigated a public fascination with Africa, but formal encounters with Africans exposed the cultural illusions behind pre-colonial discourses. Indeed, African communities were neither submissive to white settlers nor uncontrollably aggressive and dangerous. Much to the contrary, many were well versed in European languages, practiced Christianity, and possessed advanced weaponry. Moreover, they all posed a significant threat to Germany's imperial mission in southern Africa. The realities of colonial rule persuaded supporters to question the necessity of the imperial project. After the German chancellor Caprivi designated DSWA a settlement colony in 1893, colonial enthusiasts subsequently relied on nationalism, geopolitical rivalry, and racial segregation to defend Germany's presence overseas.

Witbooi never signed a ship manifest or published an editorial in the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*. He nevertheless played a decisive role in German colonial history. In both his published correspondence and his military confrontations with African rivals and the colonial government, Witbooi made Germans recognize the fallacies behind European pre-colonial views of Africa. His endeavors necessitated reactions from the colonial administration—as opposed to the other way around. François and Leutwein, in particular, personified this reality in their own separate ways: one responded with bullets, cannons, and murder, whereas the other sought a more balanced approach involving negotiation, diplomacy, and military confrontation. Their choices revealed the limits of German imperial power, as well as the brutal measures that colonial officials were willing to exercise in order to sustain a presence in southern Africa. European colonialism was an inherently violent enterprise in all cases, though the conduct, practice, and rationale for imperial conquest differed from empire to empire. In Germany, collective motivations fluctuated as costs rose and conditions grew more brutal. By the turn of the twentieth century, nationalism increasingly became a central factor in German colonial policies. As exclusionary politics and racial segregation became more important to Germany's imperial agenda, Africans found fewer outlets located beyond the reach of the colonial government where they could enjoy their own cultural, religious, and political ways of life.⁹⁸ In response, the Herero and later the Witbooi Namaqua would confront the white settler establishment once again in 1904.

At the height of the so-called *Herero Aufstand* that November, Witbooi sent the following lines to Leutwein:

I have, for ten years, stood by your law, under your law, and behind your law—and not I alone, but all chiefs of Africa. For this reason, I fear God the Father. You accuse me of murdering helpless white people and say that eighty of my men are in your custody, but who shall pay for the white people? I beg you, when you read this letter, sit down and quietly reflect [on my words]. Count up the souls who have perished in this country since you arrived, and the weeks and days and hours and minutes since they died.⁹⁹

With these words, Witbooi not only justified his decision to join the Herero in their fight against the *Schutztruppe*, but also once again altered the nature of German colonial affairs in DSWA. Though he did not live to see the end of his renewed campaign against imperial occupation, Witbooi's impact on German imperial practices carried into the next violent phase of colonial rule.¹⁰⁰ In particular, he compelled both settlers overseas and citizens in the metropole to consider the kind of colonial power they wanted Germany to be in the twentieth century. After the start of the German-Herero war, imperial authorities gave their answer in genocidal terms.

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⁹⁸BarchB, R151-F, Kaiserliches Gouvernement in Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika, Nr. 82688, "Die rechtlichen Verhältnisse der Eingeborenen, abgesehen von der Gerichtsbarkeit," W.III.A1, Reichskolonialamt 3. Verordnungsentwürfe, Jan. 8 1907.

⁹⁹Witbooi, "152. Witbooi an Leutwein," Nov. 14, 1904, in Lau, *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*, 158–59.

¹⁰⁰Witbooi died from wounds he sustained in a battle near Vaalgras in November 1905. The exact location of his grave is still unknown. See Lau, *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*, xvii.