Südweste Reiter: Fear, Belonging, and Settler Colonial Violence in Namibia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the continuities between the Herero and Nama genocide and the history of the Reiterdenkmal statue in Windhoek, Namibia. It interprets the statue as an extension of the lived experience of the genocide and a contested symbol of settler belonging. The Reiterdenkmal reformed colonial violence as white victimhood and black savagery, and advanced German settler claims over African soil. Violence and the “rider” together remade black African space into white settler space. Yet, this settler belonging was and remains grounded on fears. Uncertainty over belonging and fear of the Natives had driven the killing and exploitation of black Africans in the first place, and settler identities remain uncertain as the legacies and reckonings of past violence continue unresolved in independent Namibia.

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Windhoek, Namibia, 24 December 2013. It is the night of Christmas Eve and the nation’s capital is enjoying the holiday spirit. Yet, the city centre is buzzing with nervous commotion, taken over by a large police operation. The target: the Reiterdenkmal, also known as the Südweste Reiter, or in common parlance simply as the “rider.” Standing at the heart of the city, near the preeminent Lutheran church, the Christuskirche, and the old German garrison, now a museum, Alte Feste, this equestrian statue dates back to the German colonial era and for many it signifies white settler power over black Africans. The monument depicts a white German soldier-settler, Schutztruppe, a common man on horseback with a rifle in hand, looking assertive, masculine, and triumphant. But now, as Namibia’s German-language newspaper Allgemeine Zeitung alarmingly reports, the police have sealed off the “rider” from any curious bystanders, kept out the press, and offered no answers to inquiries as workers cut off the statue from its pedestal and haul it away. There, the paper suggests, was no information of who had ordered the removal and where the statue was going.¹ What looked certain was that the nation was...
making a strong symbolic reckoning with its colonial past, interrupting the narrative of settler triumph, and that this raised fears among the German-speaking minority (Figures 1 and 2).²

Set up in 1912 to commemorate the German victims of the “Herero uprising” of 1904 and German mastery over the land, the “rider” was first removed in 2009 for a short distance from a hill overlooking the Christuskirche to the front of the Alte Feste museum. It

² The heated commentary in the Namibian press – including white fears as well as views of the statue as an insult to black Namibians that needs to be moved – surrounding the “rider’s” removal is voluminous. See, for instance, Tuyeimo Haidula, “Battle over Statues,” The Namibian, 24 March 2014; Filemon Iiyambo, “The Horse, the Past, and Hypocrisy,” The Namibian, 7 January 2014; Pendapala Hangala, “The Reiterdenkmal Must be Trashed,” New Era, 8 November 2013.

Figure 1. The “rider” after 2013, in the courtyard of the Alte Feste, twice-removed, stocked away from public spotlight but still standing, though supported and without a pedestal. Less forceful, less commanding than before. Photo Wikimedia Commons.
moved again in 2013, as described above, this time to the inner courtyard of the said museum. The story of the “rider” is a battle over narratives, mastery over the past and the present in Namibia’s identity-politics. It is about the remembrance of the colonial era, the calls for genocide repercussions from Germany, and the ongoing tensions between different ethnic groups in the country. Through its removal, the Swapo-led government, dominated by the northern Ovambo majority, created a break from the colonial past. And by erecting on the rider’s place a Genocide Memorial and a statue of Sam Nujoma, a revolutionary hero and the first president of Namibia, it advanced the prominence of the anticolonial liberation struggle.

Yet, by substituting the “rider” with these new statues, the government also provided a reinterpretation of the nation’s past that not only repositioned black Africans as heroes, but both sidelined whites from the national narrative and recast them as perpetrators of colonial aggression. The removal interrupted the narrative of the “rider” also on

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3 The descendants of the most affected groups, Herero and Nama, have been shut out by the Ovambo government from the still ongoing bilateral negotiations between Namibia and Germany over the acknowledgement of the 1904–08 genocide and possible restitution. See Henning Melber, “Colonial Genocide and the German-Namibian Reconciliation Agreement,” The Round Table 110, no. 4 (2021): 510–1; Henning Melber, “Why Reconciliation Agreement Between Germany and Namibia Has Hit the Buffers,” The Conversation, 9 January 2022, https://theconversation.com/why-reconciliation-agreement-between-germany-and-namibia-has-hit-the-buffers-173452 (accessed 10 January 2022). On German memory politics, see Franziska Boehme, “Reactive Remembrance: The Political Struggle over Apologies and Reparations Between Germany and Namibia for the Herero Genocide,” Journal of Human Rights 19, no. 2 (2020): 238–55.

4 Elke Zuern, “Memorial Politics: Challenging the Dominant Party’s Narrative in Namibia,” Journal of Modern African Studies 50, no. 3 (2012): 495–7.
another level. While settler colonialism relies on the replacement of Indigenous peoples by the incoming, conquering, settlers, now it looks as if the settlers are the ones facing displacement when the “rider” was substituted. Out of public view, its pedestal destroyed, supported by steel poles, the “rider” today looks feeble and handicapped, increasingly irrelevant, as if its present condition is marking an end to the period of settler belonging in the Namibian society.

German colonial history comes with a paradoxical relationship to monuments. At least since the Cold War and the removal of the Herman von Wissman (colonial administrator in German East Africa) statue in Hamburg in 1967 after student protests, there has existed anticolonial activity in Germany targeting public monuments and spaces. Colonial monuments have been toppled and defaced and their histories questioned. But there also exists a widespread notion that Germans suffer from colonial amnesia and ignorance as colonial histories are hidden and marginalized in school curriculums and public discussions. Yet, there currently exists numerous active grass-root movements, calling for the decolonization of public spaces and return of stolen artefacts, coupled with ongoing negotiations between Germany and Namibia over recognition and compensation of the Herero genocide. Thus, the discussion on colonialism and colonial legacies today is very active.5

If situated in this bigger picture the “rider” reflects overlapping international and internal renegotiations and battles over who owns the past, what kind of histories we tell, and the difficulties in moving to the next step of decolonization, to reconciliation, forgiveness, equality, living together. It epitomizes disputes over ethnic and national identity, land distribution, and racial inequality, all linked to the fraught interpretations and bloodied past of settler colonialism and its ongoing heritage and durabilities.

This article looks specifically at the origins and life of the Reiterdenkmal statue in Windhoek, in order to examine the continuities and connections between the Herero and Nama genocide and the history of this monument. It interprets the statue as an extension of the lived experience of the genocide and a contested symbol of settler belonging up to the twenty-first century. It sees colonial violence and the “rider” as inseparable, part of the same historical and narrative processes. First, from its initiation, the “rider” underlined German prominence over the land in Southwest Africa acquired through colonial violence against the Herero and Nama in 1904–08. It promoted white victimhood and black savagery while camouflaging and repackaging genocidal violence as a triumphant white sacrifice, a symbolic birthing of a German settler society through “blood and soil.” In doing so, it sought to affirm settler belonging, that the land now belonged to the settlers for good. In a sense, genocidal violence and the “rider” together remade black African space into white settler space. Violence had cleared the land, bringing it to German settler hands and the “rider” affirmed this new order, this settler triumph.

Yet, second, the “rider” also acts as an indicator on how fragile and uncertain this settler belonging was in the past and remains such in the present. Uncertainty over belonging and fear of the local Herero and Nama had driven the killing and exploitation in the first place, and settler identities remain uncertain as the legacies and reckonings of

5 Among the oldest groups are Arbeitskreis Hamburg Postkolonial (2004), freiburg-postkolonial (2005), Köln postkolonial/KopfWelten (started preparations for their exhibition as early as 2000). There are also Germany-wide initiatives like the touring exhibition “freedom roads” or the NGO-alliance “No amnesty on genocide.” For an extensive list of organizations and initiatives, see https://www.kolonialismus.uni-hamburg.de/2015/09/10/postkoloniale-initiativen-in-deutschland-2/.
past violence continue unresolved in independent Namibia.6 After the end of formal German colonialization in 1915, the settlers remained and so did the “rider.” The statue stood at the heart of the capitol as an effort to control the past in the present, quelling settler uncertainties, while echoing the ongoing power and relevance of the settlers in a changing world. But in the twenty-first century independent Namibia, the “rider” has been pushed aside and replaced by new monuments to black Africans. The settler colonial narrative of belonging has come full circle as settler fears and insecurities have resurfaced.

This article combines what historian Maria Nugent called the “history of the memorial” with “history told on the memorial.”7 It starts by discussing the initiation of the “rider,” the character of the settler colonial narratives of belonging it conveys, and the question of settler colonial endings. Then it goes back in time to describe the “rider’s” origins in German violence against the Herero and Nama, a settler genocide driven by fear with staggering human cost. Finally, it moves to highlight how the “rider’s” repackaging of violence as settler triumph and innocence stood changing times and decolonization, until it did no more.

A Monument for Settler Belonging

Windhoek, German Southwest Africa, 27 January 1912. The town woke to a festive mood abuzz with patriotic fervour. The red, white, and black flag of the Kaiserreich was visible everywhere and a large white crowd wearing their best gathered on the hill where the German garrison, Alte Feste, stood. People made their way along Kaiser Wilhelm Strasse, Garten Strasse, and numerous others in a town that by now looked like Germany in miniature. The main cause of festivities was the unveiling of a 16-foot bronze statue, the Reiterdenkmal, “a monument of victory” for Germans over black Africans, as historian Reinhart Kössler asserts.8

The choice of an equestrian figure in itself reflects a tradition in the German-speaking cultures of making statements about triumph and rule. During the Kaiserreich equestrian monuments, such as the gigantic Deutsches Eck (German corner), a rider figure of Kaiser Wilhelm erected in Koblenz near the French border in 1897, commemorated German victories, in this case the wars of unification. The “rider” in Windhoek came to existence via a public fundraising campaign conducted in Germany and through an artistic competition announced in Berlin. Yet, local authorities and settlers in German Southwest Africa initiated the process, petitioning the Colonial Office in Berlin already in 1907. Thus, resources were involved from both the colony and the metropole. Adolf Kürle designed the monument in Berlin, from where it travelled via Hamburg to Swakopmund on the coast of Southwest Africa. Changing from boat to rails, it arrived in Windhoek a few weeks before its inauguration.9

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6 On the close association between fear and colonial violence, Richard N. Price, “The Psychology of Colonial Violence,” in Violence, Colonialism, and Empire in the Modern World, eds. Philip Dwyer and Amanda Nettelbeck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 30–7; Kim A. Wagner, Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); Matthias Häussler, The Herero Genocide: War, Emotion, and Extreme Violence in Colonial Namibia (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021).

7 Maria Nugent, “Historical Encounters: Aboriginal Testimony and Colonial Forms of Commemoration,” Aboriginal History 30 (2006): 36.

8 Reinhart Kössler, Namibia and Germany: Negotiating the Past (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2015), 148.

9 “Chronology of the Monument,” in The Equestrian Monument (Reiterdenkmal) 1912–2014: A Chronological Documentation of Reports, Newspaper Clippings, and Photos/Illustrations (Windhoek: Kuiseb Verlag, 2014), 7.
There is a movement forward mimicking settler advance in the statue’s travelogue: it arrived on Southwestern soil from Germany, via the global shipping nexus Hamburg and the local port town of Swakopmund, much as the bulk of the settlers did. This is only fitting for a monument interpreted at the time as a symbol of German belonging in Africa. That the unveiling took place on the birthday of Kaiser Wilhelm II drove home the point more powerfully: the “rider” epitomized the rise of German power that had materialized through German blood connected with German soil. This land now had a prosperous German future ahead. At the inauguration ceremony, Governor Theodor Seitz proclaimed this message to all when stating that the German soldier depicted in the statue was “on the look-out … over the land, proclaims to the world that we are the masters here and shall remain so” (Figure 3).10

The bronze equestrian figure at Windhoek rode on a base made of granite blocks. In front of this base stood a dedication plaque with an inscription that lists the white victims of the colonial war by their rank, profession, and gender. The text reads:

In honor of the brave German warriors who lost their lives for the emperor and empire to save and preserve this country during the Herero and Hottentot [Nama] uprisings from 1903 to 1907 and during the Kalahari expedition in 1908. In honor of the German citizens who fell victim to the natives in the uprising. Fallen, lost, killed in an accident, killed [due to] their wounds and dead of diseases, from the Schutztruppe: officers 100, NCOs 254, riders 1180,

Figure 3. The “rider” as it stood after its inauguration, with Windhoek’s settler community in audience. Bildarchiv der Deutschen Kolonialgesellschaft, Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt am Main, urn:nbn:de:hebis:30:2-993395.

10 Seitz quoted in Joachim Zeller, Kolonialdenkmäler und Geschichtsbewusstsein: Eine Untersuchung der kolonialduetschen Erinnerungskultur (Frankfurt am Main; Iko Verlag, 2000), 120.
from the Navy: officers 7, NCOs 13, crew 72. Slain in the uprising: men 119, women 4 children 1.11

While this plaque commemorates those Germans who had died, it can be read as an effort to reinforce the German settler colonial rule. First, it stressed German sacrifice as it repackaged German colonial violence against the Herero and Nama as white innocence. The statue explicitly and exclusively commemorates fallen German soldiers killed by aggressive black Africans. White Germans gave their lives both for the empire, the larger whole of Germanness stretching across the world and personified in the Kaiser, and to this particular land. They spilled blood for the sake of this land, which affirmed their belonging to it. Second, none of the dead were named. Not even the highest-ranking officers. They were all part of the settler project not as individuals but as part of a collective. They had made an individual sacrifice for the good of all the white settlers, saving the colony from savage danger and for the prosperous future of the settler community. It is this collective ethos that enforces the notion that the “rider” is meant to stand for the white settler community as a whole, in 1912 and in the future. It has been a symbol of the settler collective from its initiation.

Thirdly, the text makes no mention of black African dead in this colonial conflict. It gives no indication to their suffering, but instead dismisses it completely. Indeed, like Winfried Speitkamp has noted, as colonial rulers occupied African space through monuments they at the same time subjugated African history.12 The sole role black Africans have here is that of the aggressors. The plaque casts the blame for the violence on the Herero and Nama, making them instigators of killings and Germans the victims of their bloodthirstiness. This regardless that the “rider” stands at the site of a former concentration camp for the Herero and Nama, a site where numerous black Africans perished in German hands. The plaque casts the Herero and Nama as a threat that the Germans have managed to check, in the process “preserving” the country for the settlers and their future generations. In this manner, the Herero and Nama get written out of the futures of this land. Here the “rider” mirrors what was de facto already taking place in the society as Germans ousted the Herero and Nama survivors from the land, used them as forced labour, and quelled their sovereignty, making the survivors servants to the whites.13

As the “rider” stood for German victory and for the presence and permanence of Germans in Africa, it carried high hopes, potentially signifying the birth of what the German settler Clara Brockman at the time called “new Germany on African soil.”14 Settlers like Brockman had reasons for optimism with the mining rush around Lüderitz Bay finally booming the colony’s economy from 1908 onward. Combination of mineral riches and visions of family farmers and ranchers dominated the future-oriented settler minds. People like Brockman or the geographer and publicist Paul Rohrbach, tasked to

11 Translated from German by author. Image of the plaque at Joachim Zeller, “Das Reiterdenkmal in Windhoek (Namibia) – Die Geschichte eines deutschen Kolonialdenkmals,” https://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/Seiten/Zeller-Reiterdenkmal-1912.htm (accessed 27 April 2021).
12 Winfried Speitkamp, “Kolonialherrschaft und Denkmal: Afrikanische und deutsche Erinnerungskultur im Konflikt,” in Architektur und Erinnerung, ed. Wolfram Martini (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 166.
13 On the post-genocide social order in Southwest Africa, see Daniel J. Walthier, Creating Germans Abroad: Cultural Policies and National Identity in Namibia (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).
14 Clara Brockman, Die deutsche Frau in Südwestafrika. Ein Beitrag zur Frauenfrage in unseren Kolonien (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1910), iv.
promote German immigration to Southwest Africa, envisioned a colony that would reinvigorate Deutschtum (Germanness), producing a purer German space, a counterpoint to the modernizing, industrial, and politically divided metropole Kaiserreich in Europe. As Rohrbach envisioned that over 2 million Germans would settle in Africa in the twentieth century, both he and Brockman championed German families, while denigrating local Africans as incapable of self-rule.\(^{15}\)

The “rider” celebrates this vision of the ordinary settler. He is a cavalryman dressed in Schutztruppe uniform and holding a rifle upright. His posture is erect and assertive, his uniform spotless. He is a proud conqueror, both looking over the country as it was his, but also prepared for war and violence, for any further trouble from the belligerent Africans. While assertive, the statue nevertheless symbolized ongoing German insecurities. It marked incipient, not yet fully consolidated rule, promising security to the settlers, while serving as a warning and a threat to potential insurgents. Thus, the “rider” is both conveying a message of power but reflecting underlying German fears toward the natives; the notion that further uprisings may happen at any moment and that the settlers’ position remains uncertain. While the plague painted the Germans as victims and stressed their sacrifice in cementing the connection to the land, the “rider’s” posture projects both masculine strength and that the settler needs to remain vigilant and willing to fight if he is to remain in this land permanently. It is this double message, of power and frailty, that the “rider” would carry post-German colonial rule.

A typical colonial narrative has a circular form with a clear return, while a settler colonial narrative differs from this as it moves forward without a return.\(^{16}\) The key ingredient of this kind of narrative structure is the settlers’ quest to indigenize themselves. They transform space, by replacing the natives, by carrying their lifestyles with them and making the place their own, and by renewing the settler to suit the land. They make claims that the land and the sacrifice and work the settler has put into this land have made them belong. As Mahmood Mamdani suggests, both initial replacement and ongoing dominance require and rest on violence, physical and discursive. Settlers remain settlers through continuous privilege and difference between them and the natives.\(^{17}\) Central here is the idea of permanence and belonging to the land. It is the settler who is at home and who makes the future. Until that is, the settler is kicked out. While settler rule remains firmly fixed in North America and Australia, for example, it has officially at least been overturned in Africa.

In settler colonies, ending, meaning decolonization, usually takes the form of settler exodus, settlers leaving the land, and the repression of the settler colonial narrative. This was the case in French Algeria, where forced settler departure after World War II created bitterness, longing, and nostalgia. But much of this took place in France, the destination of the settler diaspora, not in the former settler colony itself.\(^{18}\) When departing

\(^{15}\) Mark T. Kettler, “What did Paul Rohrbach Actually Learn in Africa? The Influence of Colonial Experience on a Publicist’s Imperial Fantasies in Eastern Europe,” German History 38, no. 2 (2020): 243–5; Paul Rohrbach, Deutsche Kolonialwirtschaft-1 Band: Südwest Afrika (Berlin: Buchverlag der Hilfe, 1907); Lora Wildenthal, German Women for Empire (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

\(^{16}\) My text here is inspired by Lorenco Veracini’s thoughts. See Veracini, Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview (London: Palgrave, 2010), especially 21–3, 96–8, 113–4.

\(^{17}\) On settler colonial identity and replacement, see Mahmood Mamdani, “Settler Colonialism: Then and Now,” Critical Inquiry 41, no. 3 (2015): 596–614; Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” Journal of Genocide Research 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.
French Algeria, settlers also took many of their statues with them, while others were demolished soon afterwards by the new regime. Repatriated to France, some of these monuments were re-erected in key public spaces. For instance, the statue of Marshall Thomas Robert Bugeaud, known for his merciless “razzia” tactics in colonial warfare, was originally erected in Algiers in 1852. Much like the “rider,” it stood as a symbol of settler power and victory over the natives, originating from extreme violence and openly celebrating settler conquest and erasure of Africans. But as Algeria struggled for independence, Bugeaud’s monument needed to go in 1962. This French settler hero was erased from the Algerian public space and he no longer belonged to the narrative the decolonizing nation wanted to elaborate as its heroes. Yet, Bugeaud found a new home in Excideuil, France, where he still stands.19

In German Southwest Africa, this kind of process never happened. The “rider” did not go to Germany when Germany lost Southwest Africa to the British during World War I. The area became subject to a South African “mandate” rule and many of the white settlers – some 15,000–20,000 in all, of whom approximately half were Germans, the rest British and Boers – stayed. Some Germans – officials and soldiers – the new regime deported, but new white settlers also continued to arrive, including Germans. German culture and presence remained strong, whether it was imports of goods, street names, architecture and design of public spaces, food, holidays, festivals, or language and customs.20 So stood the “rider,” becoming a focal point for the emerging identity of the German-speaking populace. Affirming the German settlers’ ongoing standing, the apartheid regime even declared the “rider” a national monument in 1969.

Conquest of Fear

Okahandja, German Southwest Africa, 12 January 1904. News of fighting in the streets and Herero siege of the German fort alerted the settlers, quickly spreading panic among them. After the initial chaos, German Governor Theodor Leutwein still saw it as a local trouble. He was sure that if he would personally meet the Herero leader Samuel Maharero, things would calm down quickly and cooler heads prevail. But they never did. Leutwein never got his chance for developing a diplomatic compromise, as Berlin hurried reinforcements to Southwest Africa so that soldiers soon outnumbered settlers. Pointing out that this “genocide arose from failures in planning and became the tragic climax in a campaign of disappointments,” historian Matthias Häussler has recently emphasized racism and emotionality in explaining the conflict. Failure and frustration, shame and fear fuelled the violence.21 Violence stemmed from and brought to the fore the tensions between fear and belonging; the gaps between settler aspirations for land and often disappointing realities. German doubts and weaknesses on the ground clashed with their claims for superiority over supposedly savage foes. The Germans saw the natives as expendable,

18 Amy L. Hubbard, Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noir, Identity, and Exile (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); Fiona Barclay, “Remembering Algeria: Melancholy, Depression and the Colonising of the Pieds-Noirs,” Settler Colonial Studies 8, no. 2 (2018): 244–61.
19 Zeynep Celik, “Colonial Statues and their Afterlives,” Journal of North African Studies 25, no. 5 (2020): 716–7.
20 On the identity-building of the German settler community, see Walther, Creating Germans Abroad, especially 112–9 on the post-World War I situation.
21 Häussler, Herero Genocide, 3–18 (quote 3). See also Jeremy Sarkin, Germany’s Genocide of the Herero: Kaiser Wilhelm II, His General, His Settlers, His Soldiers (New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), especially 8.
inferior obstacles to be ridden over when fulfilling the goals of a higher European settler civilization looking for land and prosperous futures. What was at stake was much more than German pride among empires. German settler futures in Africa stood on the line.

To understand this vortex of fear, one can start with how many in Germany worried over mass flight to the Americas, fearing it would sap the young nation of its energy and talent, necessary for industrial growth and world-power status. Seeking to divert these emigrant flows to German colonies, Southwest Africa became the only even remotely suitable option for large numbers of Germans to live in. But it proved a disappointing failure. Acquired as a protectorate in 1884, the German sphere of influence in Southwest Africa rested on a series of protection treaties with local communities, and only gradually advanced inland from the coastal area. Flanked by the Namib and Kalahari deserts in the west and east, the central highland plateau held the potential for low-density cattle ranching and possibly even some farming with irrigation. It provided just enough water for imagining settler futures there. But the plateau was a highly contested ground and German presence was weak. There were few traders, some missionaries, and limited government presence in the form of an imperial commissioner (governor after 1898) and a handful of soldiers. Crucially, very few Germans actually wanted to start a new life there, and by 1902 only 2,500 had done so. This was a pitiful figure compared to the hundreds of thousands of Germans who relocated to the Americas.

As settler colonization teetered on the brink of failure, the official rhetoric promoted German mastery over the country. This had been the case since the German Chancellor Leo von Caprivi declared to the Reichstag in March 1893: “We possess South-West Africa once and for all; it is German territory and must be preserved as such.” Although its value as a settler destination remained questionable, Southwest Africa had already aroused feelings of national pride and stirred imaginations of German destiny. In order to attract white settlers to realize an agrarian settler society, which many Germans advocated as ideal, vast tracts of cheap land needed to be available. Yet, in the eyes of settlers and German officials, strong native tribes stood in the way, forming a major obstacle for German settler futures.

The Herero and Nama were cattle-raisers, traders, and raiders. They were also expansionists and rivals for grazing lands and trade control, and as such active participants in the contested and dynamic borderlands exchanges and networks that linked Portuguese Angola and the Cape Frontier through modern Namibia. The Herero occupied the northern ends of the central highlands, but slowly migrated to the south, while the Nama were part of the northward expanding peoples from the Cape. In the mix were also the missions of the Rhenish Mission Society, highly influential in the economic and political issues in times of periodic drought and ongoing intertribal wars. When the Germans arrived to

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22 With their irrigation projects in Southwest Africa, the Germans sought practical advice from the United States and its conquest of the arid deserts and plains in the trans-Mississippi West. See Jeannette Eileen Jones, “How the Südwest Was Won: Transnational Currents of American Agriculture and Land Colonization in German Southwest Africa,” in German and United States Colonialism in a Connected World: Entangled Empires, ed. Janne Lahti (London: Palgrave, 2021), 153–76.

23 Stefan Manz, Constructing a German Diaspora: The “Greater German Empire”, 1871–1914 (London: Routledge, 2014); Dirk Hoerder and Jörg Nagel, eds., People in Transit: German Migrations in Comparative Perspective, 1820–1930 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

24 Von Caprivi quoted in Helmut Bley, South-West Africa under German Rule, 1894–1914 (London: Heinemann, 1971), 3.

25 For a more detailed analysis of the Herero-Nama relations, see Jan-Bart Gewald, Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890–1923 (Athens: Ohio University Press 1999), 10–28; Bley, South-West Africa, xxi–xxvi;
this already contested borderland, they were a new player hardly worth Herero and Nama attention. Soon the Germans also realized how the locals refused to accept German authority. This, as historian Adam Blackler notes, “shattered the illusion of German cultural superiority.”

Emphasizing an increasingly militant approach, the Germans tried to advance their power by sending in the colonial army, the *Schutztruppe* and Captain Curt von Francois to subdue competition. Von Francois openly advocated violence against the Africans as a way to establish German rule. He fought against and established treaties with the Herero, set up a base at Windhoek, and campaigned against Nama sovereignty in the early 1890s. In the late 1890s further interpersonal violence, of beatings, rapes, and murders by settlers against black Africans, coexisted with the Rinderpest (cattle plague) epidemic that killed most of the Herero stock.

Still, the native respect for the German military remained, in Leutwein’s words, “zero.” Germans became increasingly marred by self-doubts and frustrated by their inability to dictate their will on the natives. This feeling of insecurity fuelled self-doubts and racial animosities. Since the beginning of German presence, there had existed a matrix of concerns over what Africa and Africans would do to the settlers psyche. One strand of these narratives focused on the apparent futility of civilizing and ruling over Africans. These notions claimed that black Africans, inherently ignorant and child-like, lacked the mental capacities to work as Germans expected, to understand Christianity, or to follow European social mores and use of domestic goods. Teaching them amounted to a loss of time. Furthermore, there existed concerns that colonial terrain and the environment corrupted and decivilized the white settler, altered and spoiled the German character. This happened as the settler succumbs to savage violence that was purportedly needed to control the unruly natives and resorts to sexual predation when lured by hyper-sexual and seductive Indigenous women. The real fear was that the settler imports these traits to his home, to Germany proper and to the domestic sphere.

From the instant violence erupted in January 1904, various types of fears guided German military actions; fears over what the natives would do to the settlers and fears that the Germans would not effectively manage to prove their superiority in the field and crush the enemy. At the first moments in Okahandja, Germans clustered to the fort, overcome with fear. One settler caught in the turmoil painted the Herero as wicked murderers who had planned the attack weeks ahead. He noted how “farms were attacked everywhere in the country and the owners murdered,” while the settlement at Okahandja, he continued, “looked devastated, all the private houses looted

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Gesine Krüger, “The Golden Age of the Pastoralists,” in *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War (1904–1908) in Namibia and Its Aftermath*, eds. Jurgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2008), 8–14.

26 Adam Blackler, “From Boondoggle to Settlement Colony: Hendrik Witbooi and the Evolution of Germany’s Imperial Project in Southwest Africa, 1884–1894,” *Central European History* 50, no. 4 (2017): 454. On German weakness in relation to Herero and Nama, see Häussler, Herero Genocide; David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), esp. 50–5.

27 Olusoga and Erichsen, Kaiser’s Holocaust, 56–69, 76–8; Gewald, Herero Heroes.

28 On the Rinderpest, see Bley, *South-West Africa*, 124–9.

29 Theodore Leutwein, *Elf Jahre Gouverneur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika* (Berlin: Mittler und Son, 1908), 19.

30 Paul J. Edwards, “Bury the Gold Again Before the Europeans Bring Us Their Culture: Witzblätter and the Paradox of German Anticolonialism,” *German Studies Review* 44, no. 1 (2021): 5–7.

31 Suggesting that something had gone awry in German Southwest Africa, commentaries were made in popular German satirical magazines such as *Simplicissimus*. See Edwards, “Bury the Gold Again,” 12–13.
As the Herero raided German settlements, German reports and newspapers feasted on alleged reports of Herero raping and killing German settler women and children. In reality, this was not the case. Yet stories did not die down, and the official General Staff account repeated these rumours of Herero savagery. Interestingly, the “rider” does not advance this colonial myth. While promoting German blood sacrifice, the plague lists only four German women and one child killed.

As German reinforcements poured into Southwest Africa, fear metamorphosed into revenge. Fear grew into a doctrine that first mixed exemplary violence with the search for a standing battle, and as the latter proved humiliating for the Germans at Waterberg in August 1904, evolved into a dictum of punishment and annihilation. Punishment was what even the more moderate Germans on the ground called for. They saw that the natives needed to be taught a lesson, punished for their transgressions so that they would learn never again to rise against the settlers. This, in turn, would guarantee peace and Herero submission to German rule.

Yet, what constituted punishment in the field was usually the death sentence. It had few or no alternatives at first. Writing in May 1904, Leutwein made it known to his superiors that in the field “nonwounded Herero have not been taken at all” and only few wounded had been captured before court-martialed to death. Killing had become the norm, an everyday occurrence as a settler diary remark from 3 February seems to attest: “On the way to Waldau we caught two Hereros with rifles, whom we simply hung on to the next tree.” Local units and junior officers had great latitude to punish any Herero without authorization from their superiors. Thus, the German military campaign took the appearance of summary proceedings followed by summary executions in the bush. Some patrols made of deputized settlers shot at any Africans they viewed as the enemy, or suspected as thieves.

Fear of the colonized Africans and a sense of privilege resulted in the pedagogy of punishment, to a situation where executions formed the standard conduct of war expected and even demanded of the German troops. This method was carried over to Summer and Fall of 1904. Replacing the more diplomatic Leutwein, General Lothar von Trotha advocated a race war, envisioning a showdown at Waterberg against the Herero in August. As that failed to produce a triumphant victory, he issued a proclamation to the Herero on 2 October 1904, with a core message that “every Herero, whether found armed or unarmed … will be shot.” Concerned over German performance, Trotha explained his de facto extermination order to his superiors by arguing that the African “negroes will yield only to brute force, whereas negotiations are quite pointless” and that there could be “no question of negotiations” unless the Germans wanted to “betray our impotence and confusion.” For Trotha, violence

32 Eugen Mansfeld, The Autobiography of Eugen Mansfeld: A Settler’s Life in Colonial Namibia, trans. Will Sellick (London: Jeppestown Press, 2017), 45, see also 46–51.
33 General Staff, Die Kämpfe der Deutschen Truppen in Sudwestafrika (Berlin: Mittler und Son, 1907), 24–6.
34 Isabel V. Hull, Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany (London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 18–19.
35 Leutwein to Colonial Department, Nr. 395, Windhuk, 17 May 1904, Bundesarchiv-Berlin, R 1001M Nr. 2115, 68.
36 Mansfeld, Autobiography, 53.
37 Hull, Absolute Destruction, 18–20; Viktor Franke Diary, Bundesarchiv-Koblenz, N1 Franke.
38 Von Trotha quoted in Horst Drechsler, “Let Us Die Fighting”: The Struggle of the Herero and Nama Against German Imperialism (London: Zed Press, 1980), 156–7, 160–1.
was about hiding the doubts of German weakness and assuring German futures in Africa, a means for ensuring German settler rule over the land.

At the time Trotha delivered his proclamation the conflict spread to include Hendrik Witbooi’s Nama, horrified of what the Germans were doing. The Kaiser in turn apparently did not know of Trotha’s proclamation beforehand, but delayed rescinding the order and ultimately sanctioned its methods. Driven to the deserts, chased and annihilated when met, the Herero and Nama faced a disaster, although some managed to escape the German reach into neighbouring British territories. Soon the Germans cleared space by gathering the survivors into camps where the death toll rose to staggering figures. In 1908, the final days of the genocidal violence bled into the early days of the diamond boom around Lüderitz, contributing to mass death of African workers in the diamond fields. The doctrine of punishment was again prevalent as former military men supervised the African labour that was treated “as all-but-formal slaves.”

While we will never know exactly how many died, even the general estimates reveal the shocking human cost. There were only an estimated 15,000 Herero and 11,000 Nama left by “rider’s” inauguration, compared to the 70,000–90,000 Herero and 20,000 Nama before the violence. Today, a majority of scholars treat the conflict as the first genocide of the twentieth century. Many argue that it was a significant precedent for the Nazis and the Holocaust, in championing mentalities, honing techniques, and nurturing personal connections that culminated in the mass killings of European Jews. In the present, Germany and Namibia also engage in tardy negotiations over official recognition of the genocide as well as possible monetary compensation and the return of looted colonial artefacts.

But in the early twentieth century, violence had “opened” the land for the settlers. As Matthias Leanza recently pointed out it was not truly until after the genocidal violence that German settler colonization gained momentum. Germans had taken Herero and Nama lands, subjected the survivors to servile labour and to reservations where they were forbidden to practice their own religion and culture. Native lives were controlled by three ordinances set in 1907: among other things these established a native register, mandatory pass-badge and travel permits. They also denied native ownership of livestock without white permission. Germans had also issued legislation banning interracial marriages (effective retrospectively) and instigated biological racial designations. In 1912, settler futures looked brighter than they ever had before. Yet, they continued to rest on multiple doubts and fears, even after being cemented by an impressive new monument at the heart of the capitol.

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39 Steven Press, *Blood and Diamonds: Germany’s Imperial Ambitions in Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 124–5. On the camps, see Jonas Kreienbaum, *A Sad Fiasco: Colonial Concentration Camps in Southern Africa, 1900–1908* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

40 For population estimates, see Drechsler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 214, 229; Olusoga and Erichsen, *Kaiser’s Holocaust*, 229–30; Leutwein, *Elf Jahre*, 11.

41 See, for example, Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz?: Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2011); Jürgen Zimmerer, “Colonialism and the Holocaust: Towards an Archeology of Genocide,” in *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. Dirk A. Moses (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004); Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, “The Pre-History of the Holocaust? The Sonderweg and Historikerstreit Debates and the Abject Colonial Past,” *Central European History* 41, no. 3 (2008): 477–503; 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* 35, no. 3 (2005): 429–64.

42 Matthias Leanza, “Colonial Trajectories: On the Evolution of the German Protectorate of Southwest Africa,” *Comparativ* 30, no. 3–4 (2020): 376.
From Settler Innocence to Settler Replacement

Windhoek, Namibia, 27 January 2012. An anxious crowd had gathered for the centenary celebration of the “rider.” Representing the German-speaking community was Harald Koch, from a German heritage organization. He spoke that the “rider” symbolized the memory of “all the soldiers and civilians of German descent who died 100 years ago.” He added that this centenary commemoration was also about remembering “all the other people who lost their lives in that war. This monument should remind us of what happened and it should ensure that something like that does not happen again.” Koch’s words echoed universal remembrance and atonement, and he assigned meaning to the “rider” as a warning against extremism. His choice of words were still heavily criticized in the Namibian government for skirting the issue of Germans committing genocide. Minister Joël Kaapanda noted that “Koch’s ‘other people’ were not caught in a cross-fire…they [Herero and Nama] were systematically and mercilessly exterminated.”

At the same time, the Namibian President Hifikepunye Pohamba proposed that the “rider” should even return to Germany, as its presence remained too divisive and disruptive in Namibia. Pohamba saw that the monument symbolizes German victory over black Africans and therefore “it must be removed.” Representatives of the National Heritage Council of Namibia concurred, stating that the “rider” “celebrated the victory of the Germans and it has lost its significance.” It has “divided people” and that “it should no longer divide people” as an obstacle to the healing of the nation from past colonial oppression. The government also directed a message to people in the white settler community, saying that those who sympathize with what the “rider” represents for “should be happy it was not taken to the dumpsite, because it should be disposed of.”

 Asserting that time was up for the “rider,” the National Heritage Council also stripped the statue as a national monument, the official document giving as reason that the “rider” “does not have any significance in a liberated Namibia.”

 Seen as a relic of the colonial past and a symbol of oppression, the “rider” was thus pushed out of sight and to the margins of the national story in 2013. Many in the white community felt outraged and upset. Some commented that the government had committed an illegal act and that the removal was simply “barbaric and short-sighted,” stripping those of German descent their place in the country’s heritage. Yet the descendants of the settlers are still in Namibia, and their privilege at least in terms of land ownership and standard of living is still very real. In fact, the disparities of wealth in Namibia

43 Tanja Bause, “Monument’s Centenary Remembered,” The Namibian, 30 January 2012; Magreth Nunuhe, “Kaapanda Lashes Out at Centenary Speech,” New Era, 3 February 2012, both reprinted in The Equestrian Monument, 115–6.
44 Ellanie Smit, “Reiterdenkmal to be Hidden Away,” Namibian Sun, 22 October 2013, reprinted in The Equestrian Monument, 127.
45 Quotes from “Reiterdenkmal Gallops Again on Christmas,” The Namibian, 26 December 2013 and “… as Reiterdenkmal Disappears Overnight,” Namibian Sun, 27 December 2013. See also Elvis Muraranganda, “Government Presses on with Reiterdenkmal Removal,” Namibian Sun, 24 December 2013, reprinted in The Equestrian Monument, 130; Helvi Inotila Elago, “Colonial Monuments in a Post-Colonial Era: A Case Study of the Equestrian Monument,” in Re-Viewing Resistance in Namibian History, ed. Jeremy Silvester (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2015), 289–91.
46 National Heritage Council of Namibia, https://www.nhc-nam.org/content/deproclamation-equestrian-statue-and-declaration-new-sites (accessed 4 January 2022). The Public Notice issued by the National Heritage Council declared that the “rider” had lost its significance already in 1915, with the end of German colonial rule, and for the second time in 1990, with Namibian independence. Republickein, 20 December 2013, reprinted in The Equestrian Monument, 129.
47 Theresia Tjihenuna, “Anger over the Reiterdenkmal Removal,” The Namibian, 7 January 2014.
are some of the steepest in the world, still echoing the racial lines set during colonial times.

Erected to push forward the German settler colonial fantasy of mastery over the land coupled with attempts to affirm German settler belonging on that land, the “rider” was meant to strengthen the sense of unity and shared destiny among the German-speaking populace. And it served that function ever since 1912. It has occupied a key place in what can be dubbed as construction of identity via nostalgic objects, physical remnants of (imagined) past glories. In this reading, it, as Joachim Zeller notes, commemorates German heroes, whose deeds “affirm ‘Deutschtum’ (Germanness)” in Africa, who faithfully served the German nation.48

What was left out of the monument also reveals the settler mentality. There were no notions of sorrow over the dead Africans or feeling of German guilt or remorse. Neither did the “rider” as such show any visible sign of German vulnerability. Even suggestions of including a fallen German soldier in the monument were refuted by the settler community. Including such a figure would have indicated a triumph for the black Africans and of German weakness. There existed a controversial precedent, the German Marine Monument raised in the coastal town of Swakopmund in 1908. It did contain both a fallen German fighter and an active combatant standing above his perished comrade, and the settlers heavily criticized it at the time for ostensibly showing the wrong message to the black population.49

Settlers continued to celebrate the “rider” during the apartheid era. In fact, it remained the most important memorial for the German-speaking populace. It was there and the German military cemetery at Waterberg where settlers gathered annually for commemorations and remembrance. At the 25th anniversary of the violence, all the guilt still rested on the Herero while the settlers swore to defend Germany ethnicity and futures on African soil. A settler speech given near the “rider” on the occasion declared: “This land cannot be taken from us” as the blood sacrifice of those Germans who died is a “holy seed which may not be suppressed by force and therefore German culture, the German way of life and the German language shall justly continue to flourish here for all time.”50

Settler belonging was “for all time” and it relied on colonial violence and blood sacrifice as manifested on the “rider.” During the Cold War era, the German-speakers continued to gather by the “rider” regularly to convey this message to their own community and to black Africans. As long as the “rider” stood, the German-speakers would be ok, no matter their numbers. Whites were always the minority in Southwest Africa, and the Germans were the minority among whites as more Boers moved in during the apartheid era. In 1915, the population of German Southwest Africa stood between 50,000–100,000 Africans and 14,000–20,000 Europeans.51 So the whites formed a sizable minority. Today the demographics have shifted considerably, and among a populace of more than 2.5

48 Joachim Zeller, “Symbolic Politics: Notes on the Colonial German Culture of Remembrance,” in Genocide in German South-West Africa, 235. See also Klaus R. Rüdiger, Die Namibia-Deutschen. Geshichte einer Nationalität im Werden (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993).
49 Zeller, “Symbolic Politics,” 234. For more recent calls for removal and protests against the Marine Monument, see Norimitsu Onishi, “A Colonial-Era Wound Opens in Namibia,” New York Times, 21 January 2017; “Coastal activists call for removal of Marine Denkmal,” New Era, 17 July 2015.
50 Excerpts from the speech by farmer Gustav Voigt from Zeller, “Symbolic Politics,” 235–7, see also 243.
51 Press, Blood and Diamonds, 106, 113.
million there are an estimated 100,000 whites, of whom some 30,000 claim German descent.

Besides affirming German settler belonging by repackaging the genocidal violence, the “rider” has also been a rather flexible tool of political contestation and identity politics. During the apartheid regime, the “rider” was made a national monument, but it was also used as site of protest against white minority rule. After the Old Location Uprising in 1959 – a violent clash where police shot activists protesting the apartheid regime in a racially segregated non-white district of the capitol – activists placed a sack over the “rider’s” head and decorated the rest with flowers. Later protests in the early 2000s saw a field of red crosses placed on the grass around the monument, and a Namibian flag pushed down the barrel of the “rider’s” rifle.

Its presence increasingly questioned, the “rider” nevertheless outlasted Namibian independence in 1990, continuing to tell the story of settler presence. By then it had also became part of popular culture and tourist industry. There exists “rider” postage stamps, stickers, books, and other tourist memorabilia such as miniatures and coffee mugs. You can find the “rider” also in the logo of a local brewer, as well as in other company logos.

In 2001, the Namibian Cabinet declared the intention to move the “rider” and to make room for a new museum centring on Namibia’s independence struggle. This created heated opposition and growing fears over belonging, mainly from the German-speaking populace. Some, such as the Namibian German-speaking historian and activist Andreas Vogt, proclaimed that the erection of the “rider” in 1912 had been an apolitical act. He asserted that the statue formed part of a shared German and African history and heritage. He acknowledged that this included histories of violence, but that among these the German colonial war against the Herero and Nama had been just one conflict among many. Vogt argued that all Namibians ought to accept the “rider” as part of their shared heritage that included violence and they should conserve and preserve the statue. He also pointed out that the “rider” is a memorial to war heroes, thus curiously recycling the initial message of the “rider” as celebrating Germans fighting a savage threat. As such, Vogt sees the “rider” as part of a broader repertoire of similar monuments across Namibia, some of them local, others national, such as the Heroes’ Acre. He argues that the heated conversation surrounding the “rider” only further attests to its importance, constantly reinterpreted over time as a living monument.

Set up outside of Windhoek in 2002 as a national memorial, the Heroes’ Acre forms an interesting counter-narrative to the “rider” in public space. It mythicizes the Namibian battle for freedom and independence through a teleological nation-state lens. It honours past black heroes such as Samuel Maharero and the Nama leader Hendrik Witbooi, killed by the Germans in 1905. In other words, it traces Namibian resistance and national heroism to the struggle against German colonialism. At Heroes’ Acre, the Herero and Nama fighters are made part of the national story, while the Germans are

52 On “Old Location” and racial divisions of Windhoek during the apartheid, see Henning Melber, “Revisiting the Windhoek Old Location,” Basler Afrika Bibliographien Working Paper 3 (2016): 1–23.
53 See The Equestrian Monument, 48–55.
54 Andreas Vogt, “To Move or Not to Move,” The Namibian, 18 July 2008. For the disputes surrounding the removal proposition, see Kuvee Kangueehi, “Reiterdenkmal Debate Divides the House,” New Era, 23 June 2008; “Keep the Reiterdenkmal,” The Namibian, 11 October 2013; Bob Kandetu, “Statues are Artifacts of History,” Informante, 24 October 2013, all reprinted in The Equestrian Statue, 69, 142, 128–9.
aggressors, not commemorated. There is no Leutwein or von Trotha at Heroes’ Acre. They – and by association all German settlers – are outsiders, not belonging to the national story. Heroes’ Acre replaces settlers with black heroes (Figure 4).

A proposal in the early 2000s called for the recontextualizing of the “rider,” from the one-sided commemoration of German victims to more inclusive narration that would give voice to the previously silenced Herero and Nama side of the story. This recontextualization could link the “rider” to the prisoner camp that stood nearby the Alte Feste during the genocide. In this way, the “rider” could be reinterpreted for the future, the proposal put.55 There was also an earlier initiative in the 1990s for adding a complementary memorial tablet to the “rider” to acknowledge all victims of colonial violence, but neither came to no avail.56

Importantly, while the Namibian government removed the “rider” it also replaced it with new monuments in the key public spaces of the capitol. Where the rider used to be there now stands a gigantic statue commemorating the revolutionary and independence activist Sam Nujoma. Next to it stands the new shiny Independence Memorial Museum as well as the Genocide Memorial portraying the black victims of German aggression. These new monuments tell different stories, elaborate different heroes and narratives of belonging. They underline victory over colonization. The Genocide Memorial in particular exhibits a complete reversal of the original message of the “rider,” being a monument to the victims of German colonial violence and linking the Herero and Nama sacrifice to current Namibian freedom. Thus, the “rider” is literally and symbolically substituted and because of that it is the settler and the settler colonial narratives that now face marginalization and replacement (Figure 5).

If the descendants of settlers now fear erasure, the fate of the “rider” may just mark the beginning of a new era. For example, the statue of Windhoek’s German “founder” Curt von Francois is the target of an ongoing civic campaign “A Curt Farewell.” Seeing the monument as a celebration of colonial rule, Namibian activists call for the removal of von Francois’

Figure 4. The Heroes’ Acre, a massive outdoor monument celebrating anticolonial struggles. Photo by Henrik Laaksonen. Used with permission.

55 Goodman Gwasira, Bennet Kangumu, and Gilbert Likando, “The Rider Monument: Contested Space,” The African, October/November 2004, reprinted in The Equestrian Monument, 62–3.
56 Kössler, Namibia and Germany, 154.
statue from a central location on Independence Avenue. Based on these recent developments it would be a logical conclusion to state that settler history and prominence perpetuates values and narratives with which Namibia no longer wishes to be associated.

**Conclusion: Reinterpreting the Past in the Present**

Swakomund, Namibia, 16 February 2019. “Reiterdenkmal pops at Swakomund!” Thus declares the day’s issue of the newspaper *The Namibian*. A local restaurant owner in

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57 “Curt von Francois – Time to Go,” https://ippr.org.na/blog/curt-von-francois-time-to-fall/ (accessed 28 April 2021); “A ‘Curt’ Farewell,” https://www.change.org/p/mayor-of-the-city-of-windhoek-fransina-kahungu-a-curt-farewell?use_react=false (accessed 4 June 2021).
Swakopmund had placed a “rider” replica about the half of the original on the roof of his establishment. The move immediately drew controversy and demands for its removal. The white restaurant owner explained in the newspapers that he wanted to give a museum-type atmosphere to his place and that he erected the replica with the aim of showing visitors to his restaurant the journey that Namibia had took to attain freedom.58 Placing a copy of a monument celebrating settler rule over black Africans and settler belonging on African soil on his roof, the restaurant owner nevertheless ended up making a provocative statement.

Looking at the experiences and narrations from the nineteenth century to the present-day, the story of the “rider” reveals the two sides of the settler identity, power and fragility: the sense of entitlement, mastery, and self-assuredness, but also continued doubt and suspicions over belonging and fears toward black Africans. For decades, the “rider” proved an adamant yet controversial survivor, occupying a key public space, editing history in ways that served the interests of the settler community that had become a small yet influential minority in the former settler colony. While substituted and out of sight today, the 2019 episode in Swakopmund shows that the “rider’s” legacy remains disputed and continues to epitomize the contestations over the meanings and interpretations of the past within Namibia. While many in Namibia saw the “rider” as a festering wound at the heart of the capitol, others viewed it as a symbol of their belonging and status. For many in the black majority, the “rider” stood as a painful reminder of colonial oppression, destruction, and white supremacy. For the small white minority of German background, it was a symbol of their community and identity, indicating they had a legitimate connection to the land, that they belonged here. The “rider” has become to symbolize an ongoing battle over the country’s past and identity, not only between white and black, but also involving power relations between the majority Ovambo and the minority Herero and Nama. In many ways, the “rider” signifies Namibia’s failed internal reckoning with colonialism. It manifests still visible scars.

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58 Adam Hartman, “Reiterdenkmal Pops Up at Swakopmund,” The Namibian, 16 February 2019; Eveline de Klerk, “Swakopmund Restaurateur Stirs Up Emotions with Reiterdenkmal Replica,” New Era, 8 April 2019; Gina Paula Figueira, “‘That Horse Will Never Rise Again’: An Exploration of Narratives Around the Iterations of the Reiterdenkmal Statue in Namibia,” International Journal of Heritage Studies 27, no. 9 (2021): 10–12.
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