

Tanzania Demands Reparations for German Colonial Atrocities

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Germany's colonial role in Africa has been highlighted again as the Tanzania government placed the European state on notice that it will file an official complaint over the atrocities committed during the early 20th century.

This report comes in the aftermath of a similar effort by representatives of the Herero and Nama peoples of the Republic of Namibia, formerly known as South-West Africa under imperialism. Approximately 80 percent of the population of these two groups died as a result of a German extermination order issued by General Lothar von Trotha during the anti-colonial revolt of 1904-1907.

In the East African state of Tanzania, the government informed the National Assembly on February 9 that it would pursue an apology along with monetary damages for the crimes carried out in the years of 1905-1907 when an uprising occurred in the southern region of the country. Dr. Hussein Mwinyi, who serves as Minister for Defense and National Service, informed the Parliament of its intentions to work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to develop the proper approach to the issues involved.

The Maji Maji War (1905-1907)

Colonial authorities under the direction of Karl Peters, the founder of the German East Africa Company, imposed a draconian system of land theft, forced labor, economic exploitation and unjust taxation. Africans were forced from their traditional societies in order to make way for the European military and administrative apparatus.

Africans were mandated to leave their villages to produce wealth for export to other European nations. The levying of a tax on the people was designed to compel men to work for the colonial firms in the sectors of agricultural commodities, mining and railway construction.



Resentment quickly grew and an uprising erupted in July 1905. It was led by Kinjikitile Ngwale, also known as Bokero. The first wave of Africans attacked German garrisons as well as cotton fields from the Matumbi Hills utilizing traditional weapons and a formula composed of water, castor oil and millet.

Bokero believed that the formula spread over the bodies of the warriors would protect them from the high-powered German weaponry. The uprising was not just limited to the Matumbi and in a matter of weeks other ethnic groups including the Mbunga, Kichi, Ngoni, Ngindo and Pogoro joined in the campaign to eliminate European rule. This anti-colonial movement represented a significant development in that it transcended sectional divisions embarking upon a Pan-African approach to the national liberation struggles that would reach fruition decades later in the mid-to-late 20th century.

According to an entry published by the Black Past website: “The apex of the rebellion came at Mahenge in August 1905 where several thousand Maji Maji warriors attacked but failed to overrun a German stronghold. On October 21, 1905 the Germans retaliated with an attack on the camp of the unsuspecting Ngoni people who had recently joined the rebellion. The

Germans killed hundreds of men, women, and children. This attack marked the beginning of a brutal counteroffensive that left an estimated 75,000 Maji Maji warriors dead by 1907. The Germans also adopted famine as a weapon, purposely destroying the crops of suspected Maji Maji supporters.” (blackpast.com)

Bokero, the spirit medium whose propaganda inspired the war, was captured and executed for treason on August 4, 1905. Nonetheless, the struggle continued for another two years under the renewed and expanded leadership.

Superior military weapons and reinforcements by the German government crushed the uprising by August 1907. Not satisfied with this military defeat of the Africans, the colonial authorities deliberately withheld food from the people leading to widespread deaths from starvation, thirst and disease.

German Colonialism in Africa

With the failure of German imperial ambitions at the conclusion of World War I, the role of this European nation in the rise of colonialism on the continent became obscured. Other imperialist states such as Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, Spain, the United States and Italy would continue their economic plunder of Africa past the conclusion of the War in 1918 earning enormous wealth for the multi-national corporations and international finance capital.

However, it was in Germany under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck that the gathering known as the Berlin West Africa Conference was held from November 15, 1884 to February 26, 1885. The aim of the meeting, called for by Portugal, was to bring together the leading European colonial powers and the U.S. to divide the continent in order to facilitate greater cooperation and consequent profit-making for the imperialists.

An article by Elizabeth Heath published in Oxford Reference notes: “Rivalry between Great Britain and France led Bismarck to intervene, and in late 1884 he called a meeting of European powers in Berlin. In the subsequent meetings, Great Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and King Leopold II (Belgium) negotiated their claims to African territory, which were then formalized and mapped. During the conference the leaders also agreed to allow free trade among the colonies and established a framework for negotiating future European claims in Africa. Neither the Berlin Conference itself nor the framework for future negotiations provided any say for the peoples of Africa over the partitioning of their homelands.”

Resulting from the imperialist consultations was the German Act of the Berlin Conference. The document sought to guide the Europeans away from conflict in order to guarantee a workable process of super-exploitation of African resources and labor.

Germany was awarded colonial territories not only in East Africa which encompassed modern-day Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania but also Togo and Cameroon in West Africa and Namibia in the sub-continent. Additional settlements in Guinea and the area around Ondo state in Nigeria were attempted without success. Other locations within contemporary Chad, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Central African Republic and the Republic of the Congo were also under the control of German imperialism during various periods between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The collapse of the German imperial state in the years of 1915-1918 prompted the invasion and occupation of their colonies by the military units of the so-called Allied Powers during World War I. By 1919 these territories had been wrested from German colonial domination at the aegis of the League of Nations and soon parceled over to Belgium, France, Portugal, South Africa and Britain.

Reparations Needed to Renew African Development and Unity

African Union (AU) member states are more than justified in demanding official apologies and compensation for the enormous damage done by imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact it was the Atlantic Slave Trade beginning in the 1400s and extending into the 1800s that created the conditions for the rise of colonialism in Africa.

Even today the economic dependency of independent states is rooted in the colonial period of relations with Europe. Although African nations won formal national independence over a period of decades between the 1950s and the 1990s, with the exception of the Western Sahara still under Moroccan occupation inherited from Spain four decades ago, these post-colonial governments are limited by the develop model based upon supplying raw materials, agricultural crops and cheap labor to the industrialized countries.

Consequently, the debt owed to the capitalist financial institutions including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank remains an impediment to both national reconstruction and continental unification. If the African continent speaks with one voice on this question it will serve as a mechanism for acquiring the necessary resources to break with the imperialist system of resource extraction and labor brokerage.

Africa must build its own internal industries and economic system which serves the interests of the majority of workers, farmers and youth. The enormous wealth of the continent should be harnessed for the benefit of the people.

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