Time to Call Things as They Are

Ulrich Roos

Timo Seidl

• **ULRICH ROOS and TIMO SEIDL**

ONLY a few weeks ago, some of the most important German political authorities, including the federal president and the Bundestag, finally brought themselves to recognise the Ottoman empire´s atrocities against the Armenian minority during World War I as genocide.

This was an obvious and long overdue step – but nonetheless a welcome one.

If we allow ourselves to be optimistic for a moment, we might expect it to have an impact on the German government's stance on another genocide which Germany still refuses to acknowledge: the genocide against the Herero and Nama in Namibia committed by German colonial troops at the dawn of the 20th century.

But if we force ourselves to keep the political realities in perspective, we have to note that nothing like this has happened yet, nor is it likely to happen in the near future (although we would be glad to be proven wrong).

Those who are privy to Germany's persistent reluctance to come to terms with and find an appropriate terminology for its colonial past must have been deeply disconcerted by the blatant yet unspoken hypocrisy that surrounded the recognition of the Armenian genocide.

Do not get us wrong here: We are not criticising the decision to recognise the Armenian genocide for what it was. We are just calling attention to the fact that most of the arguments in favour of this recognition are equally applicable to the Namibian case.

So let us see what we have heard over the past 25 years about the Herero and Nama genocide and contrast this with some more recent statements about the Armenian genocide. The difference is striking and raises some troubling questions.

Germany's official position since Namibia's independence has been one of strict terminological reluctance alongside limited responsiveness to the wishes of the Namibian government. The main goal was and still is to avoid the term genocide at any cost, since it might entail the risk of reparations, not only from Germany itself but also from German companies and other former colonial powers.

Unlike the victims and their descendants, they can count on Germany´s unrestricted solidarity, or so it seems.

Admittedly, Germany is willing to pay higher-than-average development aid. But this also keeps the Namibian government from effectively adopting the victim groups' reparation claims (or seriously tackling the economic privileges of the German-speaking minority).

For obvious reasons, the Namibian government will wisely abstain from doing any of this, so it can blithely continue allocating German development money to its (mostly Aawambo) supporters.

Of course, the special initiative, instigated by the former German minister of development Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul and aimed at specifically promoting those areas that suffered the most under German rule, is more than nothing. But it can and should also be more than a middle-sized fig leaf, used to avoid taking historical responsibility seriously.

Germany should, therefore, not only continue but significantly expand this programme, not least to enable the expropriated groups to get back on their feet and eventually on the land they were expelled from. Moreover and equally importantly, Germany should finally acknowledge the massacres perpetrated by its troops against the Herero and Nama people as an act of genocide.

Wieczorek-Zeul herself took an inestimable step when she risked her job to explicitly apologise for this genocide on the occasion of its centennial. But as long as her speech stands on its own, its political and moral value remains limited. As long as the German government continues to duck the question, every attempt to achieve true reconciliation will be severely limited from the outset.

The Bundestag recently acknowledged the importance of having a historically adequate terminology to commemorate the past. Unfortunately, this understanding has not yet reached the government and certainly not the foreign office.

They still employ the stubbornly legalistic argument that genocide was first criminalised and made punishable by the 1948 UN Genocide Convention and that therefore it would be wrong to call the crimes committed in the name of the German Reich between 1904-08 genocide.

The woeful ignorance of the deeply political nature of the issue at stake displayed by German authorities has always been somewhat disingenuous – and it is even more so after the parliamentary debate on the Armenian genocide.

Conservative MP Nobert Röttgen, for example, leaves no doubt that "recognition of genocide is a question of human dignity", that it touches the "foundational normative commitment" of the German society and should not be subject to any form of political "weighting". Another conservative MP, Christoph Bergner, also clearly, albeit not knowingly, disagrees with Germany's official policy towards Namibia when he states that it is "a normal expression of language development to use more recent terms to describe older events."

The same is true for yet another representative of the governing conservative party, Bernd Fabritius, when he makes the seemingly rhetorical remark that "nobody would come up with the idea to whitewash other genocides with the same [legal] argument."

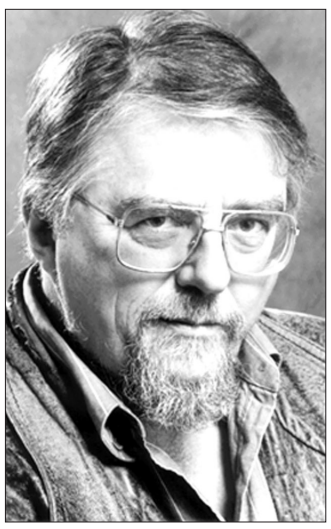
Remember, all these statements were made in reference to the Armenian genocide and found to be valid. Therefore, they raise the question why they are not valid for Germany's own and – as the recent debates have once again shown – forgotten genocide in former Deutsch-Südwestafrika.

Since we cannot figure any reasonable justification for this kind of double standard, Germany should seriously ask itself if its hypocritical and short-sighted policy of de facto denial is in its own interests as well as in the long-term interests of German-Namibian relations.

The centennial of the capitulation of the Schutztruppe on 9 July 1915 was another missed chance for a significant revision of Germany's stance on the tragic past for the sake of a brighter future.

• *Ulrich Roos and Timo Seidl are German political scientists researching German-Namibian relations.*

The Hardest Word to Say



Gwynne Dyer

• **GWYNNE DYER**

IT is hard to say sorry, but it is even harder to say you are sorry for a genocide. The word just sticks in the throats of those who should be saying it, as the Turks have been demonstrating for the past 100 years in the case of the Armenians of eastern Anatolia. And the Serbs have just shown themselves to be just as tongue-tied in the case of the Bosnian Muslims slaughtered at Srebrenica.

Saturday was the 20th anniversary of the murder of between 7 000 and 8 000 people when Srebrenica was taken by Bosnian Serb forces in 1995. The town's population was swollen by refugees who had fled there to escape the "ethnic cleansing" that was being carried out against Muslims elsewhere in eastern Bosnia, because it was a United Nations-designated "safe area" defended by Nato troops. Or rather, not defended.

When the Bosnian Serbs, having surrounded Srebrenica for three years, finally moved to take it in July 1995, the UN and Nato commanders refused to use air strikes to stop them. And the Dutch troops who were there to protect the town decided they would rather live and let unarmed civilians die.

So all the Bosnian Muslim men and boys aged between 14 and 70 were loaded onto buses – the Dutch soldiers helped to separate them from the women and children – and driven up the road a few kilometres. Then they were shot by Serbian killing squads, and buried by bulldozers. It took four days to murder them all. The crime has been formally declared a genocide by the UN war crimes tribunal for former Yugoslavia. Both the Bosnian Serb president of the time, Radovan Karadzic, and the Serban military commander at Srebrenica, general Ratko Mladic, are awaiting verdicts in trials for directing the genocide. You would think that even the Serbs cannot deny that it was a genocide, but you would be wrong.

There are certainly some Serbs, like journalist Dusan Masic, who are willing to call it what it is. His idea was to have 7 000 volunteers lie on the ground before the National Assembly in Belgrade on Saturday, symbolising the approximate number of Muslim victims at Srebrenica.

"On 11 July, while the eyes of the whole world are on the killing fields near Srebrenica", he said, "we want to send a different picture from Belgrade."

"This will not be a story about the current regime, which has failed to define itself in relation to the crime that happened 20 years ago," he continued, "or about a place where you can still buy souvenirs with images of Karadzic and Mladic. It will be a story about ... a better Serbia." But the better Serbia has not actually arrived yet.

Words matter. Serbia's prime minister Aleksandr Vucic, who seems to have changed his mind about Srebrenica since his early days in Serbian politics, still cannot bring himself to use the word "genocide" when he talks about it.

Back in 1995, Vucic was a radical nationalist who declared in the Serbian National Assembly, only a few days after the Srebrenica massacre, that "If you kill one Serb, we will kill 100 Muslims". By 2010, however, he was saying that a "horrible crime was committed in Srebrenica".

Vucic even travelled to Srebrenica on Saturday to take part in the commemoration of the events of 20 years ago, a brave gesture for a Serbian prime minister who must contend with an electorate most of whom do not want to admit that Serbs did anything especially wrong. But he still doesn't dare say the word "genocide". The voters would never forgive him.

Most Serbs would acknowledge that their side did some bad things during the Balkan wars of the 90s, but they would add that every side did. They will not accept the use of the word "genocide" – whereas that is the one word Bosnian Muslims have to hear before they can believe that the Serbs have finally grasped the nature and scale of their crime.

That is why, when Vucic was at Srebrenica paying his respects in the cemetery, some Bosnian Muslims started throwing stones at him. His glasses were broken, and his security detail had to hustle him away.

It was a stupid, shameful act, and the Bosnian Muslim authorities have apologised for it. But like the Turks and the Armenians, the Serbs and their neighbours will never really be reconciled until the Serbs say the magic word.

•*Gwynne Dyer is an independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.*