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Violent Encounters: Practices and Perceptions of Violence in Southern Namibia and the Northern Cape, c. 1880-1910

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Violence was a central force in the establishment and upholding of colonial rule, but is rarely studied systematically as a research subject in its own right. The project addresses this gap by exploring practices and perceptions of violence, particularly everyday violence, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century southwestern Africa.

Everyday violence unquestionably played a crucial role in the border region of southern Namibia and the northern Cape: Africans' day-to-day struggles with and resistance to violent colonial oppression, seizure of land and livestock as well as conscription into forced labour in the agrarian settler economy coincided with conflicts within and between African polities revolving around political power and influence, social status and economic wealth.

The project explores how and in what ways practices of (everyday) violence such as shooting, flogging or beating and the meanings ascribed to them were (re)shaped in the border region between c. 1880 and 1910. African actors, especially Nama-Oorlam and Herero groups, are at the center of its focus. In order to gain insights into the different actor's habits of using violent practices and to discern possible shifts, the project seeks to closely describe everyday violent practices and to situate them in the historical context of African pastoralism, settler colonialism and colonial state-building. Adopting an entangled history perspective and drawing on frontier and borderland concepts, the project furthermore explores whether there were instances of mutual learning and adaptation between African, Afrikaner and European actors in the course of their (violent) encounters.

The study will thus contribute to a growing body of scholarly literature in Africanist and European colonial historiography discussing shared practices of colonial violence and the role of mutual observation and knowledge transfers. The empirical analysis of everyday violent practices shifts the attention away from extreme violence, combat and warfare and de-centers previous approaches solely focusing on European colonial actors. Such a perspective yields new insights into the (trans)formation of social relations in southwestern Africa around the turn of the century and into the role of violence in settler colonialism more broadly. Furthermore, the project intervenes with questions on the character and dynamic of settler colonialism as well as on the formation of polities within settler colonial contexts.

The project builds on a multitude of different printed, archival and oral sources. Extensive archival research will be conducted in Windhoek, Cape Town, London, Wuppertal and Berlin. In order to discern African voices and their agency from colonial documents, a variety of reading methods will be applied and combined with oral evidence.

Bildnachweis: Koloniales Bildarchiv, Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt