The Namibian liberation struggle

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<th>Author/Creator</th>
<th>Hillebrecht, Werner</th>
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<tr>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>Aluka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>2006-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource type</td>
<td>Aluka Essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage (spatial)</td>
<td>Namibia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Aluka</td>
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http://www.aluka.org/action/showMetadata?doi=10.5555/AL.SFF.DOCUMENT.ae000009
The Namibian Liberation Struggle

By Werner Hillebrecht

German and South African Colonial Rule

The German Reich formally claimed South West Africa in 1884 and consolidated its hold on the colony after 1894 through military and diplomatic tactics. Colonial officials also encouraged an influx of German settlers, who encroached upon the land and livelihood of local pastoralists. As a result, the Herero people rose against German rule in 1904, followed by the Nama in Southern Namibia. The ensuing war (dubbed the ‘Herero War,’ although fought mainly against the Nama) lasted until 1908 and was decided by massive German troop reinforcements. Vividly remembered for brutality against civilians, the war resulted in the large-scale expropriation of African land and livestock, turning most of the peoples of Central and Southern Namibia into labourers at the disposal of the colonial economy.

The First World War changed the colonial master but not the colonial situation. South Africa invaded German South West Africa and was awarded a ‘Class C mandate’ to administer the territory under the League of Nations. South Africa took control of the northern region as well, defeating the Kwanyama kingdom and brutally suppressing an uprising of the Bondelzwart Namah. White settlers from South Africa soon outnumbered German settlers. The former were encouraged to occupy all land in the southern and central three-quarters of the territory (called the Police Zone), except for a few tiny reserves. Since the Police Zone could not supply sufficient workers for both settlers and the mining industry, officials expanded the German system of acquiring migrant labour from northern areas. Over time the migrants from the more densely populated northern regions came to dominate the labour force within the colony.

This was the situation in Namibia when the colonial empires began to crumble in the wake of the Second World War. South Africa tried to use the demise of the League of Nations to incorporate South West Africa as a fifth province. This attempt was challenged both in the newly established United Nations, which upheld the international status of South West Africa, and within Namibia itself.

Apartheid and Anticolonial Resistance

Traditional leaders petitioned the UN against South African rule. Namibians who had served with the Allied forces in World War II started to demand democracy for themselves. Dissatisfaction with missionary dominance led to the formation of such independent churches as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Oruuano Church, whose leaders were often also active in political resistance. From the north, protest voices were soon joined by migrant workers, who eventually formed the
Ovamboland People's Congress (OPC) in 1957, later called the Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO).

The South African government began implementing their domestic apartheid policies in Namibia in the 1950s. Along with the introduction of Bantu Education, the indignities of petty apartheid, and the harsh conditions of migrant workers, the forced removals to segregated townships and distant reserves fuelled growing discontent. The forced relocation of Windhoek's black population to the newly constructed Katutura Township brought matters to a head in 1959. Police fired into a crowd of unarmed protesters in Windhoek on December 10, 1959, killing 12 and injuring many.

This protest and the regime's suppression of it fanned the flames of resistance. Teachers' organisations, independent churches, migrant workers' associations, and some traditional leaders worked to form two nationwide political organisations in 1959: the South West Africa National Union (SWANU), largely based in the central and southern regions, and the northern South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), which had its roots in the OPO. The two movements originally had few ideological differences, but the rift between their leaders kept widening. Eventually SWAPO developed into the more stable and mass-based organisation.

Repression, Exile, and Armed Struggle

The repression following the December 1959 shootings sent the first few Namibians into exile. Many leaders from the two political parties, including SWAPO (later Namibian) president Sam Nujoma, were forced to leave the country to avoid imprisonment. The majority of exiles headed first for newly independent Tanzania, a base for freedom fighters from southern Africa. SWAPO and SWANU activists later scattered all over the globe, hoping to further their education while seeking international support for the nationalist struggle.

South Africa worked to reinforce apartheid within Namibia by dividing the country “according to the 1964 Odendaal Plan” into a ‘white’ zone (where the black majority had a place only as temporary labourers) and a satellite zone of ten ‘homelands’ with pseudo-autonomy. The plan required the uprooting and relocation of entire communities, although many of the intended relocations never took place because of local resistance and the costs involved.

Discussions in exile led to the decision to launch an armed struggle. The international Namibia Conference in Oxford (March 1966) marked the beginning of broad international support for Namibia. Later that same year, the International Court of Justice dismissed the case of Liberia and Ethiopia against South African rule in Namibia, and guerrilla fighters trained in several countries returned to Namibia to set up base. The first SWAPO training camp inside Namibia at Ongulumbashe (or Omugulugwombashe) was attacked by South African forces on August 26, 1966. All combatants as well as a number of other SWAPO functionaries were arrested and tried in Pretoria under the hastily passed and retrospectively applied Terrorism Act.
The Battle of Ongulumbashe helped convince supporters that SWAPO was serious about the liberation of Namibia, while the show trial in Pretoria became a platform for rallying international support. Andimba ya Toivo, founder member of OPC and OPO and main organiser of SWAPO in the north, held a defiant speech from the dock which was circulated all over the world.

**Strikes, Informal Resistance, and Increased Conflict**

A countrywide strike against the migrant labour system in late 1971 became the next milestone of resistance. The strike paralysed the economy especially the key fishing and mining industries and forced the authorities to abandon some of the most hated elements of the labour regime. South African officials responded by deporting the strikers back to their northern ‘homelands.’ This measure inadvertently increased the opposition to the collaborationist homeland chiefs used by the administration to persecute ‘agitators’ in particular the SWAPO Youth League with such measures as public floggings. The repression led to a new wave of exiles, particularly after the Portuguese colonial regime crumbled in 1975, opening up Angola as an external base for the liberation struggle.

Growing defiance showed most tellingly in Namibia’s mainstream churches, which spoke out publicly against South African rule with their Open Letter of 1970. SWAPO launched military attacks against South African installations in Caprivi, and later in the north-central regions. South Africa used northern Namibia as a base from which to attack the Angolan MPLA government and the region became heavily militarised.

**Colonial Modifications, International Pressure, and the Cold War**

The South African regime adopted superficial changes to stem the tide of liberation. They called a constitutional conference with handpicked representatives from all population groups, ethnically defined following apartheid ideology, but specifically excluding SWAPO and SWANU. The ‘Turnhalle Conference’ began in 1975, leading to the removal of ‘petty apartheid’ legislation that prescribed residential segregation and forbade conjugal relations between Black and White. Yet the Conference entrenched apartheid on a larger scale by dividing both population and territory into ‘ethnic’ units with separate ‘governments,’ schools, and other facilities. This arrangement mirrored the increased division into ethnic identities within South Africa itself and secured the continued domination of the whites over the economy.

Meanwhile international pressure was building up against South Africa, reflecting increased resistance within South Africa itself (in the 1976 Soweto uprising, for example). In 1978, five Western members of the UN Security Council drafted a plan for a Namibian transition to independence, which was formally approved under Security Council Resolution 435 (1978).
The UN plan (known as ‘435’) was sabotaged by South Africa for another decade, however, with conservative governments in the U.S. and the UK blocking effective sanctions against South Africa. Namibian independence became a Cold War issue in connection with the Angolan struggle for independence. South Africa had invaded Angola repeatedly to topple the MPLA government and used the UNITA movement as a proxy, while the MPLA called in Cuban assistance. This constellation of forces prompted the U.S. government to demand a linkage between Cuban troop withdrawal and Namibian independence that stalled any effective progress.

The 1988 Brazzaville Accord and Namibian Independence

While support for SWANU dwindled through a series of internal squabbles, SWAPO gained strength through a continued exodus of refugees from Namibia. With international support, SWAPO built substantial administrative and educational structures in exile. The United Nations Institute for Namibia (UNIN) opened in Lusaka as a tertiary training institution and think tank for planning a future independent Namibia.

The eventual implementation of ‘Plan 435’ resulted from three different processes. The escalating costs of war in Namibia and Angola in human and material terms caused South African whites to question the wisdom of a distant ‘border war.’ The battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1988, against Angolan and Cuban forces, made the South African military realise that they were losing dominance even in conventional warfare. In addition, the growing resistance of civil society in Namibia—"including the formation of effective trade unions and a strong student movement"—challenged South African attempts to co-opt black politicians in a succession of ‘internal governments.’ Church opposition to apartheid became more effective with the formation of the Council of Churches in Namibia, which acted as coordinator and conduit for foreign support and relief funds. Independent news media, women’s organisations, grassroots forms of resistance, and eventually also a small but vocal number of liberal whites helped broaden the independence movement. Finally, the end of the Cold War removed Namibia as a proxy battlefield in East-West relations.

The December 1988 Brazzaville Accord among Angola, Cuba, and South Africa paved the way for Namibian independence. A one-year transition period under was implemented on 1 April 1989 under the authority of a UN Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG), which entailed the deployment of military and civilian components, the withdrawal of South African troops, and the holding of free and fair elections.

The independence process moved forward despite clashes between SWAPO soldiers and the South African military in April 1989 and the murder of SWAPO activist Anton Lubowski. Thousands of exiled Namibians returned home. As widely expected, SWAPO dominated the elections for a Constitutional Assembly in November 1989. The Constitutional Assembly adopted a new constitution and declared Namibian independence on 21 March 1990. The final piece of the puzzle—Namibian sovereignty
over Walvis Bay and the offshore islands claimed by South Africa was achieved through negotiations with the democratically elected government of South Africa on 28 February 1994.

About the author:

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