

# Letter from Samuel Maharero, Paramount Chief of the Herero People, to Theodor Leutwein, the Governor of the German Colony of Southwest Africa, upon the Outbreak of the Herero War (March 6, 1904)

## Abstract

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The rapid expansion of the German colony of Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia) led to increasing tensions between German settlers and indigenous peoples (Hereros and Nama) over access to land and water – tensions exacerbated by the German government's legal discrimination against indigenous residents. In 1904, the Herero revolted, attacking German farms and killing about 150 German settlers. In this letter by Samuel Maharero, paramount chief of the Herero people, written in 1904 to Theodor Leutwein, the governor of the German colony of Southwest Africa, Maharero explains what led the Herero to revolt.

When 766 German *Schutztruppen* ("protection troops") were unable to quell the revolt, an additional 14,000 German troops were sent in under the command of Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha, who replaced Leutwein. The subsequent brutal suppression of the uprising and expulsion of the Herero into the desert are now classified as genocide. Samuel Maharero (1856-1923) managed to avoid capture by escaping to the British Bechuanaland Protectorate with about 1,000 of his people.

## Source

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To the Emperor's Great Envoy,

Governor Leutwein.

I received your letter, and I understood well what you wrote to me and my chiefs. I and my chiefs reply as follows: The war was not begun by me this year, but it has been started by the whites; you know how many Hereros are killed by the white people, especially traders, with guns and in prisons. And whenever I brought this matter to Windhoek, the blood of my people always cost [no more than] some [pieces of] small cattle, namely fifty or fifteen. The traders increased the hardship still further lending to my people on credit. After they had done so, they robbed them and went so far as to get repaid by taking away by force two or three cattle for 1 pound [sterling] debt. It is these things that have caused war in this land.

And now in these days, when the whites saw that you, who have peace with us and love for us [were not there], they began to tell us: The governor who loves you has gone to a major war, he is dead, and because he is dead,<sup>[1]</sup> you will also die. They went so far as to kill two of Chief Tjetjo's Hereros, until Lieutenant N. started killing my people in prison. Ten died, and it was said that they died of disease, but they died at the hands of the labor supervisors and their clubs. At last, Lieutenant N. began to treat me badly as well and to look for a cause for which he could kill me, saying: the people of Kambasembi and Uanja are making war. Then he called me to him to question me. I answered truthfully, namely "no." But he did not believe me. At last, he put soldiers in boxes and hid them there in the fortress. And he called me so that if I came, he would shoot me. I did not go; I realized [his intention], and therefore I escaped. Then Lieutenant N. sent people with guns to shoot me. At this I became angry and said, "Now I must kill the whites [even if it means that] I die." For that I was supposed to die I heard from a white man named X. [...]

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I am the paramount chief Samuel Maharero!

## NOTES

[1] Samuel Maharero and the Herero really assumed that Governor Leutwein had fallen in Namaland.

Source of German original text: Paul Rohrbach, *Deutsche Kolonialwirtschaft*, Bd. 1: Südwest-Afrika, Berlin-Schöneberg 1907, p. 333. Re-printed in Horst Gründer, „... da und dort ein junges Deutschland gründen.“ *Rassismus, Kolonien und kolonialer Gedanke vom 16. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, Munich, 1999, pp. 151-52.

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