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Bones of Contention: The Politics of Repatriating Namibia's Human Remains

More [human remains](#) seized by German colonisers in the early 20th century have been returned to Namibia. But the formal apology Namibians are calling for is still a long way off.

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Protesters call on the [German government](#) to issue a formal apology for its treatment of Namibians. Photograph by Uwe Hixsch.

At the start of this month, 35 skulls and the 3 human skeletons, packed carefully into soft grey boxes filled with tissue, started their [journey](#) from Germany to Namibia. Over a hundred years since the human [remains](#) were first taken from the former German colony, the latest handover of bones was finalised and initiated.

In the city of Berlin, away from the cries of a small

protest demanding the German government "Apologise Now", the repatriation was marked by a low-key ceremony attended by German and Namibian officials including Namibia's Minister of Youth, National [Culture](#) and Sport, Jerry Ekandjo.

18 of the skulls and the three skeletons had been in the [possession](#) of the historical [Charité Hospital](#), while the [University of Freiburg](#) had been [holding](#) 14 of the skulls.

These latest returns signify an important [step](#) towards the full repatriation of hundreds of Namibian remains seized in the early 20th century, but pressure is mounting on the German government to issue a formal apology alongside the restitution, whilst some Namibian groups are frustrated with their own government over what they see as a lack of transparency in the repatriation process.

Chilled to the bone

The skulls and skeletons that made their [way home](#) this month were seized by Germany back when Namibia – then 'German South-[West Africa](#)' – was one its colonies. Namibia was first occupied by the European power in 1884, and in 1904, the Herero and Nama peoples – dispossessed of their land and livestock – rose up together in an [attempt](#) to expel the Germans.

In an early revolt, over 100 German settlers and soldiers were killed, but the ensuing repression of the uprising was relentless and brutal. Over the three years it took to [suppress](#) the uprising, an estimated 65,000 Hereros and 10,000 Nama were killed, representing some 80% and 50% of those entire populations respectively. It is considered the first genocide of the 20th century.

In the aftermath of the war, the Germans didn't stop. They rounded up thousands of survivors – including [women and children](#) – and placed them in concentration camps where they were subjected to torture, rape, hard labour and lynchings. Furthermore, the detainees became human subjects for scientific experiments. In 1908, Eugen Fischer – who later became a [notorious](#) anatomist for the Nazis – travelled to German [South-West Africa](#) where he conducted tests on the prisoners at the Shark Island [concentration camp](#).

Fischer's studies led him to claim white Europeans were racially superior, and he is believed to have taken hundreds of dismembered heads and beheaded corpses back to Germany for further [research](#). Over the years, these human remains came to be held by various institutions across the country.

Skeletons in the closet

Since [discovery](#) of some of these [bones](#) in the Charité Hospital archives in the mid-2000s, Namibia has requested the German government return them, but this process has slowed down by bureaucracy and years of negotiation. In 2011, [20 skulls](#) were returned in a highly-publicised event, and now, three years later, a further 35 have been returned. More are expected and institutions such as Charité have expressed their desire to make a full restitution, but these efforts have been delayed and could be undermined by the fact that some remains are believed

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to be in the possession of private individuals.

This slow progress has led many tribal elders and national heritage council representatives from Namibia to [complain](#) and accuse the German government of being disinterested. Furthermore, although there has a generally positive public response to the partial repatriations so far, some Herero, Nama and Mbanderu traditional leaders have expressed anger and disappointment that they were not consulted and included more over the process.

Some of these leaders called on their followers to boycott the recent welcoming [ceremony](#), with the chairperson of the Ovaherero and Ovambanderu Genocide Foundation (OGF), Utjijua Muinjangu, [saying](#): "The whole issue of genocide and reparations is about our own people, who were brutalised. It is about us, the direct descendants of these people and it can therefore not be about us, without us."

Other leaders expressed similar grievances but did not go so far as to snub the invitation.

A bone to pick

Many on both the Namibian and German sides emphasise the need to speed up the process of repatriation, but in some ways the real issue runs much deeper than just the return of the seized skulls and bones. For many, the fact that human Namibian remains are still trapped in German institutions is merely a symbolic and ongoing manifestation of the heinous crimes committed over a century ago.

The German government has argued that today it is Namibia's biggest source of [development aid](#), but for the groups whose ancestors were affected, this is not enough. "Reparation is not all about money money money, nothing but money," Festus Muundjua, an Ovaherero Community Representative, [told](#) News on One. "Reparation is payment in cash and in kind."

The German government has [admitted](#) that it has a moral obligation to the honour Namibia's victims and their descendants, and some officials have expressed regret in their personal capacities. However, the German government itself but has fallen short of issuing a formal apology. [Since 2004](#), parliament has been lobbied on various occasions by opposition parties to either apologise or provide reparations for the near-extirmination of the Herero and Nama, but the Bundestag has remained resistant. Most recently, it rejected a [motion](#) on the floor in 2012. [Critics](#) say that the government is concerned that if it recognises the Herero-German war as being a genocide, it might be forced to [pay out](#) billions in compensation.

However, even as Namibia presents its repatriated human remains in its National Museum and German institutions prepare for more returns, it seems that for many Namibians the wrongs of the past will continue to haunt the two country's relations unless an apology is made. The bones of some of Namibians' ancestors may be back home finally, but without material or symbolic reparations, they will still not be able to rest in peace.

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