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Mechanisms of Acknowledging Colonial Crimes: The German-Namibian Case

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Citation

Kepler, M. (2023). *Mechanisms of Acknowledging Colonial Crimes: The German-Namibian Case*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Universiteit Leiden

Master Thesis

Mechanisms of Acknowledging Colonial Crimes

The German-Namibian Case

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January 16, 2023

9911 words

Abstract

Placed in the broader literature of states' foreign policy behavior this research addresses a so far understudied question, namely what explains Germany's acknowledgment of its colonial crimes committed in today's Namibia during the Ovaherero and Nama rebellion between 1904 and 1908. Observing a general reluctance of European states to reconcile with the colonial past and looking at the therefore somewhat surprising German-Namibian case, I propose two possible causal mechanisms based on liberal theory and rhetorical entrapment to account for this rare policy outcome. According to the liberal theory mechanism, I expect former colonial powers to acknowledge colonial crimes if domestic interests change state preferences towards reconciliation with the colonial past. According to the rhetorical entrapment approach, I expect former colonial powers to acknowledge colonial crimes if political costs increase due to the strategic use of rhetorical entrapment by domestic and international actors. This is an explanatory single case study employing process tracing and using data from party publications, government and interest groups' public statements, and parliamentary debate. I find support for both hypotheses and show that the mechanisms interacted with each other illustrating important implications for other cases of German colonial violence and reconciliation processes of other European states.

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Introduction

European colonialism has led to large-scale exploitation, crimes against humanity, war crimes, genocide, and other atrocities over a period of approximately 500 years. The consequences of colonialism are still felt today in, inter alia, unstable domestic politics, economic inequality, unbalanced power dynamics in the international system, and historical trauma. Even though historians have extensively investigated the colonial past and exposed the crimes and atrocities committed during these years, former European colonial powers have still not acknowledged many of their colonial crimes. Lack of awareness of the colonial past, unwillingness to confront the dark chapters of history, and structural racism may hinder effective reconciliation processes. Not least, financial considerations also play a role. The acknowledgment of colonial crimes enables reparation claims by the victims or their descendants and calls for compensation to overcome structural disadvantages caused by European colonialism are increasing. Therefore, it is rare for European states to fully acknowledge their colonial past. For example, France still refuses to apologize for crimes committed in colonized Algeria while Belgium remains vague with respect to atrocities committed in colonized Congo (Momtaz, 2021; Nyemba, 2022). It is all the more surprising when a European state does acknowledge its colonial past. After decades of “colonial amnesia,” Germany reached an agreement on a Joint Declaration with Namibia in late 2021 (Joint Declaration) formally apologizing for colonial crimes committed in what was then German South West Africa (GSWA), recognizing the *Ovaherero*¹ and Nama genocide² and agreeing to provide substantial development aid as a form of compensation (Joint Declaration, 2021, paras. 10-18). Despite ongoing criticism from affected ethnic groups, this is a far-reaching and exceptional case that deserves in-depth study. Considering the political, social,

¹ Ovaherero (in Otjiherero language) or Herero (in English language). The former term is used, except in citations from other sources, because it is the chosen self-denomination of the Ovaherero.

² Arguable to refer to two separate genocides as the Ovaherero and Nama are different ethnic groups.

and especially financial hurdles and other European states still hardly acknowledging their colonial past, the following research question arises:

What explains Germany's acknowledgment of its colonial crimes committed in today's Namibia during the Ovaherero and Nama rebellion between 1904 and 1908?

Set in the broader literature on states' foreign policy behavior, which has so far neglected the acknowledgment of colonial crimes, this research will offer two possible causal mechanisms to explain this puzzling outcome. The first mechanism is based on liberal theory and hypothesizes that domestic interest changing state preferences from ignorance towards reconciliation with the colonial past led to the acknowledgment of colonial crimes despite financial costs. The second mechanism relies on Schimmelfenning's (1995; 1997; 2001; 2003) concept of rhetorical entrapment and hypothesizes that rising political costs due to the strategic use of rhetorical entrapment by domestic and international actors led to the acknowledgment of colonial crimes despite financial costs. This is an explanatory single case study employing qualitative methods, more specifically process tracing to test the hypothesized mechanisms. It uses data from German party manifestos and coalition agreements, public statements and publications of German and Namibian government officials, interest groups, and German and Namibian parliamentary debate. Answering the research question is relevant for several reasons. While there are legal and memory studies on the acknowledgment of colonial crimes, scholars of states' foreign policy behavior have largely neglected the topic. Considering the significant impact of acknowledgment on many former colonies but also former colonial powers this research will therefore fill a gap in the literature. Germany is far from proper reconciliation with the colonial past as it still fails to acknowledge crimes committed in other German colonies, for example, crimes committed in connection with the 1905 Maji Maji rebellion in German East Africa. By investigating the

conditions leading to the acknowledgment of colonial crimes committed in GSWA this research will help understand future reconciliation processes and may even facilitate the acknowledgment of other colonial crimes by exposing ideal domestic settings and effective rhetorical strategies. It thus has immediate implications for several cases of colonial violence in the German context but is likely generalizable to other European states in similar processes and non-colonial state crimes to some extent. This research will also apply the mechanism of rhetorical entrapment to a new issue area, possibly broadening the scope of the concept.

Structurally, I will proceed by reviewing the literature on the acknowledgment of colonial crimes, states' foreign policy behavior, and rhetorical entrapment followed by an introduction to the theoretical and conceptual framework of this research including the hypotheses. After specifying my data and its sources and providing some background information on the German-Namibian case, I will analyze both hypotheses in detail and step by step. I will conclude with a discussion of the results and some final remarks on future research and the limitations of this project.

Literature Review

Literature on the acknowledgment of colonial crimes from a foreign policy behavior perspective is scarce. Scholars have focused on memory politics and extensive legal and historical analysis of colonial crimes so far. For instance, following more general accounts on collective memory by Barkan (2000), Olick (2007) and Becker (2013), Albrecht (2014) studies German "colonial amnesia" post-WWII, and Rausch (2022) examines references to the Holocaust by postcolonial memory carriers to claim recognition of colonial crimes. Such comparisons with the memory of the Holocaust are drawn frequently, perhaps most notably by Zimmerer (2011), one of the leading proponents of the so-called "continuity thesis," according to which there was continuity from German colonial crimes to the Holocaust. Some authors detail the reconciliation process itself. For example, Kößler (2015; 2020) examines the consequences of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide and describes the postcolonial

asymmetry between Germany and Namibia still to be found today. Melber (2020) gives an overview of the German-Namibian bilateral negotiations on how to come to terms with the colonial past. Notable legal accounts of German colonial crimes include Bachmann's (2018) extensive evaluation concerning historical and contemporary international criminal law, Paulose and Rogo's (2018) case for reparations, Jagutti's (2010) contribution on possible legal actions under international law, and Goldman's (2020) perspective on intertemporal and intercultural concepts of international law. Of course, such accounts in legal and memory studies also exist concerning other former colonial powers, for instance, Belgium (Hassett, 2020), France (Löytömäki, 2013), the Netherlands (Van den Herik, 2012; Lorenz, 2015) and the UK (Hovell, 2013) and concerning other genocides, notably the Armenian genocide (Avedian, 2018). While these contributions represent the important effort of addressing the colonial past, they do not approach the topic from a foreign policy behavior perspective.

Therefore, it is crucial to turn to broader theories of states' foreign policy behavior, which scholars have analyzed through a variety of models. The most influential is the rational choice model, which assumes that the main actors in foreign policy are rational individuals who can be relied on to make informed, calculated, and value-maximizing decisions (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010, p. 68). Neorealists build on this rationalist assumption while focusing on relative power in the international system (Waltz, 1979, 1993; Keohane, 1986; Mearsheimer, 1995). Liberal scholars too build on this rational assumption but emphasize domestic structures and/or interests as the causal factors influencing a state's foreign policy behavior (Carlsnaes, 2013, p. 13). Moravcsik (1997), who must be given credit for developing a coherent and comprehensive liberal theory of international politics, formulated a mechanism of domestic individuals and interest groups pursuing their interests, thereby influencing state preferences which in turn inform foreign policy behavior under the constraints set by other states preferences (pp. 516-520, 544). Constructivists on the other hand view the social world as constructed and assert that foreign policy outcomes depend on norms, ideas, and identities

(Carlsnaes, 2013, pp. 13-14). Other approaches include bounded rationality, bureaucratic politics, organizational politics, and prospect theory (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010, p. 69).

Criticizing a conceptual gap in rational choice and constructivist approaches when the governing values of foreign policy actors are up for debate, Schimmelfenning (1995, 1997, 2001, 2003), building on previous work by Weber (1976) and Habermas (1981), suggests the concept of rhetorical action as an alternative, which is characterized by rational value- and goal-oriented action and entails the “strategic use of norm-based arguments” (Schimmelfenning, 1997, p. 227; 2001, p. 62). In subsequent work on EU and NATO expansion Schimmelfenning (2001, 2003) found that rhetorical action, committing actors to certain norms and values, may rhetorically entrap them in future actions. Scholars have tested the concept in different contexts, such as EU-Ukraine relations (Hansen, 2006), military alliance cooperation (Park, 2017), and UN security council reform (Binder & Heupel, 2020). Some enriched the concept with rhetorical coercion (Krebs & Jackson, 2007), normative enticement (Petrova, 2016), ethical entrapment (Lebow & Frost, 2018), its limitations in a post-truth age (Glenville, 2019), and rhetorical hollowing (Scherzinger, 2022). All these contributions focus on institutional settings, are limited to certain issue areas, mainly security and enlargement of organizations, and only marginally include the role of non-state actors in rhetorical entrapment. Bilateral relationships between states, non-state actors, and other issue areas have not been given enough attention.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

I will look at two possible theoretical explanations for the acknowledgment of colonial crimes, namely liberal theory, and rhetorical entrapment. For the purpose of this research colonial crimes are genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes as defined by Articles 6, 7 and 8 of the Rome Statute of 1998 committed during colonial rule.³ Acknowledgment is

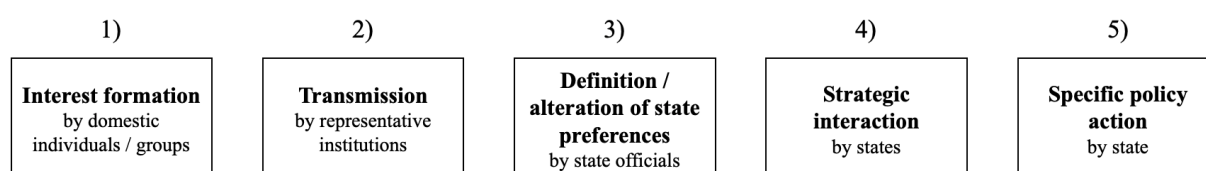
³ Retrospective legal assessment as colonial atrocities predate much of modern international criminal law.

understood as a formal apology, formal expression of regret, and/or payment of compensation or reparations. Former colonial powers are states or their legal successors which ruled colonial empires. Former colonies are states that succeeded colonies after their independence.

The first possible theoretical explanation for the acknowledgment of colonial crimes by former colonial powers is based on liberal theory as formulated by Moravcsik (1997). Liberal theory views changes in state preferences as central to foreign policy behavior. Rational and risk-averse individuals and groups define and promote their differentiated interests through political exchange and collective action and pressure the central decision-maker to pursue consistent policies (*step 1*, see figure 1). Such societal pressures are transmitted by representative institutions (*step 2*) and consequently shape state preferences, “a set of fundamental interests defined across states of the world,” which are distinct and logically prior to state strategies or policies and determined by state officials (*step 3*) (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 519).⁴ Internationally, each state seeks to realize its preferences under constraints imposed by other states’ preferences which matter due to policy interdependence. In this context, states interact strategically by debating, bargaining, or fighting on individual agreements (*step 4*). Finally, states reach specific rational foreign policy decisions under these constraints (*step 5*) (Moravcsik, 1997, pp. 516-520, 544).

Figure 1

Causal Mechanism of Liberal Theory

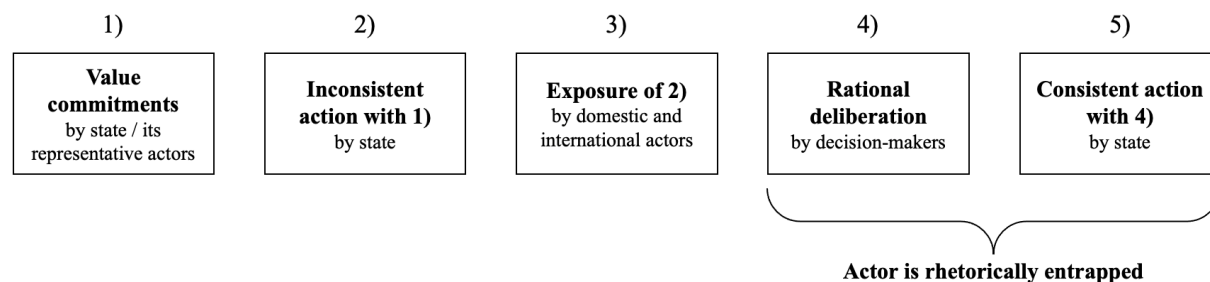


⁴ State preferences are also logically prior other theories of International Relations. Liberal theory “explains when and why the assumptions about state preferences underlying realism or institutionalism hold” (Moravcsik, 1997, p. 543).

Liberal theory suggests that a change in state preferences may have facilitated the acknowledgment of colonial crimes. Domestic interest groups and individuals, particularly political parties, may have formed and articulated interests in reconciling with the colonial past (*independent variable*) and advanced them by political exchange and collective action. Such interests may be based on “the configuration of domestic social identities and values” (Moravcik, 1997, p. 525). Interests in reconciling with the colonial past were then transmitted by representative institutions, in German democracy most notably the Federal Parliament (*Bundestag*), to decision-makers. Influenced by such pressures state preferences may have shifted from an approach that either ignored or even glorified and romanticized the colonial past to an approach that seeks historical reappraisal and reconciliation with former colonies and descendants of the victims of colonial rule. Such a shift in state preferences would likely change specific policy outcomes. As opposed to previous policies of avoidance or marginal concessions towards former colonies, policies that seek to address colonial wrongdoing by issuing a formal apology, repatriating cultural goods, and paying reparations, in short, the acknowledgment of colonial crimes would follow (*dependent variable*). Former colonial powers would be more willing to accept financial costs connected to the acknowledgment of colonial crimes as they put more importance on reconciliation with the colonial past. Naturally, such a change would not occur isolated but within the context and mediated by domestic and international society and strategic interaction with other states. However, strategic interaction would unlikely constrain preferences towards reconciliation as this is in line with other states’ preferences, namely former colonies. In summary, this theory allows the following hypothesis:

H1: If domestic interests change state preferences from ignorance towards reconciliation with the colonial past, former colonial powers will acknowledge colonial crimes despite financial costs.

Moving away from changes in state preferences, the causal mechanism of rhetorical entrapment offers another possible explanation. In short, rhetorical entrapment is a mechanism in which domestic or international actors effectively constrain foreign policy behavior by employing a value-based rhetorical strategy. In this mechanism states commit to certain values because they sincerely believe in them or because it is opportune in a given situation (*step 1*, see figure 2). However, because states are weakly socialized, they will sometimes act inconsistent with previous commitments out of material self-interest (*step 2*). In this case, other actors, including states, and domestic and international interest groups, may use certain strategies, such as rhetorical action and shaming, to push the state towards value-consistent behavior (*step 3*) (Schimmelfenning, 2001, pp. 62-64). Rhetorical action is “the strategic use of norm-based arguments” with the medium of influence being legitimacy, specifically a “standard of political legitimacy that is based on the collective identity, the ideology, and the constitutive values and norms of a political community” (Schimmelfenning, 2001, p. 63). Shaming is “the public exposure of illegitimate goals and behaviors” and is based on a previously declared support for the standard of legitimacy (Schimmelfenning, 2001, p. 64). Such strategies lead to political costs for the misbehaving state. This includes audience cost, the disapproval by domestic constituents if leaders act inconsistently with previous commitments influencing the prospects for reelection, and social costs, such as reputational damage, loss of credibility, and possible international isolation (Tomz, 2007, p. 823; Krain, 2012, p. 575). Such political cost will be considered in rational foreign policy decision-making alongside financial cost and will constrain the set of possible actions because states want to avoid domestic political backlash and international isolation, want to preserve their reputation and credibility, and want to conform to the standard of legitimacy (*step 4*). Therefore, the rhetorically entrapped state will take action within this set of value-consistent actions (*step 5*) (Schimmelfenning, 2001, p. 66).

Figure 2*Causal Mechanism of Rhetorical Entrapment*

In the context of this research, Germany may have previously committed itself to values of reconciliation with the past and recognition of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes by signing treaties or making official statements in such direction (*independent variable*), either because it truly believes in them or because it was convenient to conform to international standards. Still, this did not lead to policies consistent with such values. Instead demands for formal apologies and reparations were consistently ignored or denied. Domestic and international actors, particularly the Namibian Government, interest groups of descendants of victims of colonial crimes, NGOs, and international organizations, may have exposed the divergence of value commitments and actions, publicly shaming Germany. This resulted in or carried the risk of political costs, like declining public support for policies of avoiding the colonial past and a tainted international reputation in terms of reconciliation with the past and recognizing colonial crimes. The increased political costs of insufficient acknowledgment of colonial crimes were considered by German Government officials in their rational foreign policy decision-making and limited feasible options to more value-consistent policies, which lead to value-consistent actions, namely the acknowledgment of colonial crimes (*dependent variable*), despite higher financial cost. In summary, this theory allows for the following hypothesis:

H2: If political costs increase due to the strategic use of rhetorical entrapment by domestic and international actors, former colonial powers will acknowledge colonial crimes despite financial costs.

It's worth noting, that both mechanisms and hypotheses are not mutually exclusive and may even complement each other. A change in state preferences may support policy change alongside rhetorical entrapment strategies but is in no way required. On the contrary, actors may choose to pursue strategies consistent with rhetorical entrapment precisely when there is no change in state preferences that facilitates foreign policy change.

Methodology and Case Selection

This is an explanatory single case study employing qualitative methods, more specifically process tracing. It “emphasizes the identification of a causal mechanism that connects independent and dependent variables” (Ruffa, 2020, p. 1143-1144). This is ideal as liberal theory and rhetorical entrapment both propose such a causal mechanism. This research seeks to uncover a possible connection between a change in domestic interest or the commitment to certain values (*independent variables*) and the acknowledgment of colonial crimes (*dependent variable*). As this research is largely concerned with explaining the particular and puzzling outcome of the acknowledgment of colonial crimes it will use the specific form of explaining-outcome process-tracing. While this case-centric approach focuses on crafting a minimally sufficient explanation for a particular outcome it may involve more generalizable theory beyond a single case. I will follow a deductive approach, where two theorized mechanisms are tested to see whether they can account for the outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 18-20, 157). I will focus on one particularly interesting case, Germany's acknowledgment of its colonial crimes committed in today's Namibia during the Ovaherero and Nama rebellion between 1904 and 1908. It was chosen because it represents a rare European and the only German case in which colonial crimes were extensively

acknowledged and because of its significance of the crimes against the Ovaherero and Nama as the first genocide of the 20th century.

Data and Sources

I will formulate predictions about the expected observable manifestations of each part of the liberal theory mechanism (*see table 1*) and the rhetorical entrapment mechanism (*see table 2*) (see Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 95). For the liberal theory mechanism, the focus lies on showing domestic interest formation and measuring a change in state preferences. Domestic individuals and interest groups promote their differentiated interests through political exchange and collective action. Political parties are essential organizations in facilitating such collective action (Keefer, 2013, p. 1). I will therefore focus on party programs of major German parties⁵ in the last three general elections prior to the acknowledgment⁶ to evaluate whether domestic actors formed interests in reconciliation with the colonial past. This will be supported by looking at publications of other interest groups, particularly NGOs. As the Bundestag is the major representative institution in German democracy, I will look at parliamentary debate and motions about reconciliation with the colonial past to observe the transmission of interests. Measuring a change in state preferences is a difficult task because state preferences are not directly observable (Frieden, 1999, p. 45). Moravcsik (1997) suggests that state preferences can, *inter alia*, be inferred by “analyzing stable elements internal to states” and from “patterns of coalitional support” (p. 544). A viable strategy is looking at the “revealed preferences of groups, parties, bureaucracies, or others, (...) who set national priorities,” and then derive state preferences from them (Frieden, 1999, p. 59). Consequently, I will derive state preferences from coalition agreements of the last

⁵ Parties that entered the Bundestag in the relevant election, namely *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* together with *Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern* (CDU/CSU), *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD), *BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN*, *Freie Demokratische Partei Deutschlands* (FDP) (except 2013), *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) (except 2009 and 2013) and *DIE LINKE*.

⁶ German federal elections to elect members of the Bundestag in 2009, 2013 and 2017.

three general elections prior to the acknowledgment.⁷ These agreements represent a democratic consensus and the broader government program achieved through democratic elections and majority deliberation and therefore likely represent state preferences adequately.

Table 1

Liberal Theory – Observable Manifestations and Data Sources

Step in causal mechanism		Expected observable manifestation	Data
1)	Interest formation	Parties and other interest groups expressing interest in reconciling with the colonial past	Party manifestos of German parties for 2009, 2013 and 2017 elections NGO publications
2)	Transmission	Parliamentary debate and motions for reconciliation with the colonial past pass	Bundestag debates and motions
3)	Change in state preferences	Increasing or first-time mention of reconciliation with the colonial past in coalition agreements prior to acknowledgment	German coalition agreements after 2009, 2013 and 2017 elections
4)	Strategic interaction	Demands for acknowledgment by former colony and interest groups	Public statements by Namibian Government officials / interest groups
5)	Specific policy action	Acknowledgment of colonial crimes	Joint Declaration

Central to the rhetorical entrapment mechanism, rhetoric concerns “the art or skill of speaking or writing formally and effectively” (“Rhetoric”, n.d.). Therefore, observable manifestations and data for the mechanism of rhetorical entrapment naturally focus on public statements and publications by government officials and interest groups as well as parliamentary debate. It is difficult to define a precise timeframe for such data since value commitments may have been made some time ago or only recently. Consequently, it is important not to limit the research by artificial timeframes and instead to search extensively

⁷ Coalition agreements between CDU/CSU and FDP in 2009, between CDU/CSU and SPD in 2013 and between CDU/CSU and SPD in 2018.

for relevant statements and publications. Lastly, I will assess and interpret the observations using case-specific knowledge gathered from historical literature, legal reviews, and contemporary policy and news reports to produce reliable evidence (see Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 73).

Table 2

Rhetorical Entrapment – Observable Manifestations and Data Sources

Step in causal mechanism		Expected observable manifestation	Data
1)	Value commitments	Public references / treaties on values of reconciliation with the colonial past / recognition of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes	Public statements by German Government officials Treaties to which Germany is a party
2)	Inconsistent action	No acknowledgment	No action / formal rejections by German Government officials
3)	Exposure of inconsistent action	Public exposure of failure to acknowledge colonial crimes referencing 1)	Public statements by Namibian Government officials, domestic / international interest groups
4)	Rational deliberation	Elements of rational reasoning, e.g., references to costs, identifiable in parliamentary debate and government statements	Bundestag debates and motions Public statements by German Government officials
5)	Consistent action	Acknowledgment of colonial crimes	Joint Declaration

Analysis

In this section, I will give a conscious introduction to German colonialism in Namibia, the Ovaherero and Nama uprising, and the process of acknowledgment culminating in the 2021 Joint Declaration by Germany and Namibia. Then, drawing on the collected data, I will analyze step by step whether the proposed causal mechanisms, liberal theory, and rhetorical entrapment, are present in the German-Namibian case and if and how they interacted with each other.

Case Background Information

GSWA, present-day Namibia, was a German colony from 1884 until its seizure by South African troops in 1915. German policies of land expropriation, economic and legal injustice, and a severe debt crisis led to conflict with native groups – particularly the Ovaherero and later the Nama – culminating in an uprising against German rule in 1904 (Bachmann, 2018, pp. 39-41; Conrad, 2011, pp. 38, 42). Commander in Chief Lothar von Trotha issued the infamous and later revoked “extermination order” on October 4, 1904, which reads, inter alia, “Within German borders, any Herero with or without rifle (...) will be shot.” (Von Trotha, 1904, para. 3). Approximately 60,000 to 100,000 Ovaherero and Nama people died because of battles with German troops, starvation, dehydration, and exhaustion in the Omaheke desert, disease, malnutrition and forced labor in concentration camps⁸ and deportation to other German colonies (Bachmann, 2018, pp. 52-55, 98-102, 112-114, 132; Schaller, 2008, p. 296). The aim was to destroy the Ovaherero and Nama as a polity to prevent further rebellions and to effectively exploit their much-needed labor force. German troops reestablished control over GSWA in 1908. Acts committed during this time constitute genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (Bachmann, 2018, pp. 151-155).⁹ After the end of WWI German colonies passed to the League of Nations and the colonial past was overshadowed by WWII and the Holocaust, which subsequently were the sole focus of German remembrance and reconciliation politics (Moses, 2021, para. 19; Rausch, 2022, p. 424). Germany started to recognize its “special historical and moral responsibility” towards Namibia and began to provide extensive development aid in the 1990s, however without giving a formal apology, using the term genocide, or paying reparations. Ovaherero interest groups unsuccessfully brought class action lawsuits for compensation against Germany in US

⁸ Contemporary term which did not entail the same meaning as Nazi concentration camps. There is no evidence of systematic mass murder.

⁹ Retrospect legal assessment as colonial atrocities predate much of modern international criminal law. The precise acts constituting the respective crimes are disputed.

court in 2001 and 2017 respectively. During a visit to Namibia in 2004, the German Development Minister Wieczorek-Zeul issued an apology, which was later labeled a private statement of the minister by the German Government. Human remains, stolen during the colonial era, were returned to Namibia on several occasions since 2011. In 2015 the President of the Bundestag Lammert described the crimes committed in GSWA as genocide in a newspaper, followed by an equivalent statement by the German Foreign Office a few weeks later (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung [BPB], 2021, paras. 3-7; Pelz, 2018, para. 3). Following official requests by the Namibian government and interest groups, a formal dialogue between Germany and Namibia began in late 2015 which led to the 2021 Joint Declaration pursuant to which Germany “apologizes and bows before the descendants of the victims,” acknowledges that the “atrocities committed during periods of the colonial war culminated in events that, from today’s perspective, would be called genocide” and agrees to make available € 1.1 billion for a “reconstruction and development support program” (Joint Declaration, 2021, paras. 10-18).¹⁰ Despite criticism of the amount and type of compensation, individual wording, and a lack of participation of victims’ organizations, this agreement can be regarded as an acknowledgment of the colonial crimes for this research (BPB, 2021, paras. 8-9).

Hypothesis 1 – State Preferences

According to liberal theory, the acknowledgment of colonial crimes is expected to be preceded by domestic interest formation and transmission leading to a change in state preferences from ignorance towards reconciliation with the colonial past. Upon review of numerous party manifestos, coalition agreements, parliamentary motions and debates, and publications of interest groups there is evidence that the proposed liberal theory mechanism was present in this case.

¹⁰ Term “reparations” still avoided by the German side to prevent setting a precedent for individual claims for WWII crimes and other colonial crimes (Melber, 2020, p. 503). Recently the finality of the Joint Declaration has been disputed and further negotiations may follow (Rust, 2022).

Steps 1 & 2 – Interest Formation & Transmission

The analysis of party manifestos and parliamentary motions and debates shows that domestic interest in reconciliation with the colonial past was mentioned increasingly before the acknowledgment of the colonial crimes. Domestic interest groups and individuals, particularly political parties, did form and articulate interest in reconciling with the colonial past, which was subsequently transmitted by representative institutions. Most party manifestos for the 2009, 2013, and 2017 federal elections recognize a general duty of “remembrance of the causes and consequences of dictatorship and tyranny” and more specifically “coming to terms with the Nazi dictatorship and its genocide of European Jews” (CDU/CSU, 2009, p. 58; 2013, p. 103; 2017, p. 45; SPD, 2013, p. 62; 2017, p. 91; FDP, 2009, p. 39; BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN, 2009, p. 191; 2017, p. 153; DIE LINKE, 2009, p. 24; 2013, p. 44). Only one party wants to focus on “the positive identity-forming aspects of German history” (AfD, 2017, p. 46). The 2017 SPD and DIE LINKE manifestos mention the German colonial past for the first time. SPD seeks “to come to terms with the painful [colonial] history together with the partners in Namibia,” describes the conduct against the Ovaherero and Nama as a “genocide from today’s perspective” and demands a “clear commitment to the moral and historical responsibility of our country” (SPD, 2017, pp. 91-92). DIE LINKE asks for “a critical approach to the colonial past,” states that “Germany bears responsibility for the first genocide of the 20th century against the Herero and Nama peoples” and presents ideas for a “compensation fund for the consequences of colonialism” (DIE LINKE, 2017, pp. 60, 99, 110). This shows that between the 2013 and 2017 elections at least two parties, together reaching 29.7% in the 2017 election, formed the interest in reconciling with the colonial past (Bundeswahlleiter, 2017, table 1). This coincides with two influential petitions of the NGO Alliance “No Amnesty on Genocide!” urging the Bundestag and the German Government to take responsibility for Germany’s colonial past signed by more than 50 NGOs and numerous other individuals and interest groups, inter alia, human rights

activists, people of colors rights advocates, university professors, and other researchers, artists, journalists, politicians, political foundations and representatives of the churches (Alliance “No Amnesty on Genocide!”, 2012, 2015). Additionally, scholars have noted increasing societal debate on colonial legacies and a shift towards more engagement (Melber, 2020, p. 508). This shows that interest in reconciliation with the colonial past was not limited to two political parties but received broader societal support from individuals and interest groups alike. This interest was carried into the parliamentary debate, namely by inquiry and motions on the topic. For example, DIE LINKE proposed addressing the genocide and the colonial past in Namibia in a 2015 motion in the Bundestag (DIE LINKE, 2015, pp. 1-2). This was followed by an extensive debate on the topic (Bundestag, 2015b, items 17a, 17b). In addition, there were parliamentary requests for clarification of certain historical or legal issues related to colonial rule (BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN, 2015a, p. 1). This debate and decision-making in the Bundestag show that the interests formed by individuals and interest groups were advanced by political exchange and collective action and that the transmission of interests by representative institutions, notably the Bundestag, did take place.

Step 3 – Change in State Preferences

There is evidence that these aggregated and transmitted interests allowed for a change in state preferences toward reconciliation with the colonial past. While the 2009 and 2013 coalition agreements only contain references to the reappraisal of German dictatorships (CDU/CSU & FDP, 2009, p. 95; CDU/CSU & SPD, 2013, p. 91), the 2018 coalition agreement includes statements on the “reappraisal of colonialism” and “dealing with the provenance of cultural property from colonial heritage” (CDU/CSU & SPD, 2018, pp. 154, 167, 169). This coalition agreement is the result of deliberation between the two major parties of the 2017 election, namely CDU/CSU and SPD (together 53.5% of votes; Bundeswahlleiter, 2017, table 1). The incorporation of reconciliation with the colonial past into the coalition agreement was likely pushed by SPD, which already expressed this as a goal in its 2017 party

manifesto (SPD, 2017, pp. 91-92). This shows how interests initially formed by parties and their members emerged as state preferences through democratic deliberation in parliament and government negotiations. It represents a shift from state preferences only concerned with reconciliation with the Nazi atrocities to state preferences that also explicitly focus on reconciliation with the colonial past.

Steps 4 & 5 – Strategic Interaction & Specific Policy Action

Strategic interaction mainly consisted of demands for acknowledgment by the Namibian government and interest groups, particularly local ethnic agencies constituted as Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA) and Ovaherero Traditional Authority (OTA) and the Ovaherero Genocide Foundation (Transnational Congress on the Ovaherero and Nama Genocides [TNC], 2016, part 3; National Assembly of the Republic of Namibia, 2006, p. 10). While competing state preferences can constrain policy options during strategic interaction this was likely not the case here. German state preferences for reconciliation with the colonial past were now aligned with the demands of the Namibian government and interest groups. This introduced and advanced negotiations between Germany and Namibia and ultimately facilitated the policy outcome of acknowledging the colonial past in the 2021 Joint Declaration. In summary, the above shows that the proposed liberal theory mechanism was present in this case. Domestic interests changing state preferences toward reconciliation with the past did play a role in the German acknowledgment of its colonial crimes committed in today's Namibia.

Hypothesis 2 – Rhetorical Entrapment

According to the second proposed mechanism, increased political costs due to the strategic use of rhetorical entrapment by domestic and international actors led to Germany's acknowledgment of colonial crimes despite financial cost. Upon review of a significant number of public statements by German and Namibian government officials, publications by domestic and international interest groups, and parliamentary debates in Germany and

Namibia, there is evidence that the mechanism of rhetorical entrapment was present in this case.

Steps 1 & 2 – Value Commitments & Inconsistent Action

The analysis found that Germany made strong commitments concerning values of reconciliation with the colonial past and of recognizing genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes on several occasions. Germany is a party to both the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) and the 1949 Geneva Conventions recognizing the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. The country has apologized for its genocides committed against the Jewish, Sinti, and Roma peoples and has paid reparations in both cases, most notably under the 1952 Luxembourg Agreement (Auswärtiges Amt, 2019, para. 1; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma, 2016, para. 1). Therefore, in addition to a general recognition of such crimes, Germany set a precedent on how to adequately reconcile with the victims. Germany has recognized genocides committed by other countries such as the Armenian genocide and the Rwandan genocide (Bundestag, 2014, para. 1; 2016b, para. 1). Additionally, high-ranking German politicians repeatedly referred to the “historical and moral responsibility and the guilt incurred by Germans at that [colonial] time” (Wieczorek-Zeul, 2004, para. 6; Herzog, 1998, para. 16). Through its actions and statements, Germany has thus committed itself to recognizing and apologizing for genocides and other crimes, including its own, and to compensating the victims of violence adequately representing values of reconciliation with the past and recognition of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Germany therefore acted inconsistent with previous value commitments when refusing to recognize the colonial crimes or to pay reparations to the descendants of the victims before 2021.

Step 3 – Exposure of Inconsistent Action

This was exposed on numerous occasions by domestic and international interest groups, particularly the local ethnic agencies NTLA and OTA and postcolonial NGOs,

referencing the commitment to values of reconciliation and recognition of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. A 2006 motion on the Ovaherero genocide in the National Assembly of Namibia tabled by Ovaherero Paramount Chief Riruako asks the Namibian Government to pursue reparations from Germany and denounces the non-acknowledgment of the colonial crimes as a “gross violation of public policy and morality of the German state” and exposes the double standard when “at the same time [Germany is] seeking to justify its payment of reparations to the Jews for similar crimes committed by the Hitler regime” (National Assembly of Namibia, 2006, p. 7). It continues to reference the Genocide Convention, the Geneva Conventions, and the Luxembourg Agreement and emphasizes that Germany did not live up to the “special historical responsibility toward Namibia” as pledged by German Government officials over the years (National Assembly of Namibia, 2006, pp. 7-10). This line of argument echoes in numerous other public statements. Two influential 2012 and 2015 petitions of the NGO Alliance “No Amnesty on Genocide!”, cite the Genocide Convention and demand that, in light of the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the Bundestag, “Germany must also finally face the truth and recognize its own historical responsibility for the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama” and stop “unequal treatment for African victims of genocide or their descendants” (Alliance “No Amnesty on Genocide!”, 2012, p. 1; 2015, p. 1). Equal treatment with the recognition of the Armenian, Jewish, Sinti, and Roma genocides was also demanded in a Joint Resolution of the 2016 Transnational Congress on the Ovaherero and Nama Genocides (TNC, 2016, p. 3). The comparison with the Holocaust has on occasion led to conflicts with German delegates who perceived the Holocaust as a special and incomparable case (Hoffmann, 2016, pp. 2-3). With the draft Joint Declaration already available, interest groups opposed their inadequate involvement in the negotiations by making historical comparisons. For example, a 2021 petition by the OTA and NTLA references the direct negotiations with “23 non-state Jewish interest groups” (OTA & NTLA, 2021, p. 2). Similar references and more extensive comparisons can be found in

statements and debates in the National Assembly of Namibia (Kapofi, 2021, p. 9; National Unity Democratic Organisation of Namibia, 2021, p. 2). This shows that interest groups in Germany and Namibia alike used references to previous German commitments in international treaties, in reconciliation with the Jewish, Sinti, and Roma peoples, and in recognizing other genocides to expose the unequal and value-inconsistent non-acknowledgment of the colonial crimes. In line with these findings, in her memory study of the 2001 and 2017 class action lawsuits of the Ovaherero and Nama against Germany, Rausch (2022) also notes that “references to National Socialist crimes turned into a practice initiated by postcolonial memory carriers to claim recognition and reparation for colonial crimes” (p. 418).

Step 4 – Rational Deliberation

The statements cited above show evidence of rhetorical action, the use of norm-based arguments referencing a certain standard of legitimacy set by Germany’s previous value commitments, and of shaming, the public exposure of the value-inconsistent non-acknowledgment of the colonial crimes (see Schimmelfenning, 2001, pp. 63-64). Both strategies led to political costs for Germany, namely audience and social costs. It has been noted that the German reluctance to acknowledge colonial crimes led to enormous reputational damage in Africa (Bloch, 2018, para. 10). Advocates for the Ovaherero and Nama cause have also pointed out that Germany’s “prestige” and exemplary role in memory politics is now damaged and label the acts of the German Government as “shameful” (Zimmerer, 2018, paras. 12, 14; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2019, para. 5; Rausch, 2022, p. 428). On the other hand, reputational damage was not to be expected to the same extent vis-à-vis many Western partners. States like the UK and France are following a policy of non-acknowledgment themselves and even feared the precedent-setting effect of a German acknowledgment (Melber, 2020, pp. 503; Rietzschel, 2017, para. 10). Still, political and financial costs are reflected in the rational deliberation in parliamentary debate and

government statements. In a 2015 debate on a motion asking for reconciliation with Namibia and an apology for the Ovaherero and Nama genocide by the parliamentary group DIE LINKE and a similar motion by the parliamentary group BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN, Member of Parliament (MP) Movassat criticized that “not a single German head of state had the guts and decency to speak the word ‘genocide’ and officially ask for forgiveness,” finds this “shameful” and points out that “it would damage the international reputation of Germany if these matters end up before international courts” (Bundestag, 2015b, items 17a, 17b; DIE LINKE, 2015; BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN, 2015b). Referencing value commitments MP Fabritius refers to the recognition of the Armenian genocide and to the Genocide Convention, which should motivate similar consequences in the case of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide (Bundestag, 2015b, items 17a, 17b). In another 2015 debate MP Diaby stated “Two weeks ago, on the Armenian issue, we together rightly expected Turkey to recognize the genocide so that a process of reconciliation can move forward. We should clearly do the same for the Herero and Nama.” (Bundestag, 2015a, item 8). The same comparison between the Armenian genocide and Ovaherero and Nama genocide was drawn in two 2016 parliamentary debates (Bundestag, 2016a, item 10; 2016b, paras. 9-10). While the German Government keeps much of its positions and negotiations with Namibia classified, a need for justification and attention to value-inconsistent actions can be found in some public statements. For example, in a popular German newspaper, Ministers Grütters and Müntefering wrote “How can museums and collections justify having colonial objects in their collections whose transfer to Germany contradicts our contemporary value system?” (Grütters & Müntefering, 2018, para. 2).

These debates show that much emphasis is put on living up to the standards set by the Genocide Convention and the recognition of other genocides, particularly the Armenian genocide. Surprisingly, the numerous comparisons with the Holocaust by interest groups don’t explicitly resonate in German parliamentary debate. It seems this line of argument has been, at least partially, rejected. This may be because the Holocaust, particularly in Germany,

is often perceived as emotionally unique and the most atrocious crime that no other can match and thus prohibiting all forms of comparison or generalization. This is illustrated by the conflicts on the comparability of the Holocaust and the Ovaherero and Nama genocide between German delegates and Namibian interest groups (Hoffmann, 2016, pp. 2-3; Rausch, 2022, pp. 421, 428). However, more recently the remembrance of the Holocaust also set the commemorative standard for coming to terms with the colonial past (Rausch, 2022, p. 430). The repeated explicit mention of shame, international reputational damage, and fear of not living up to standards suggest that political costs are considered in parliamentary debate and decision-making. Along with these political costs, financial costs were also considered. This is evidenced by extensive attention to the financial implications of acknowledgment. For example, the Bundestag commissioned a comprehensive legal report on possible reparation claims in connection with the Namibia issue and comparable cases (Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Bundestags, 2016). Payments already made to Namibia were continuously emphasized in parliamentary debate (Bundestag, 2015b, items 17a, 17b; 2016a, item 10). In a 2019 motion, the parliamentary group AfD even rejected further compensation with reference to the development aid already provided (AfD, 2019, p. 1). In summary, this shows that the MPs took both political cost and financial costs into account in their rational deliberation.

Step 5 – Consistent Action

Confronted with its value commitments, namely the Genocide Convention and the Geneva Conventions, the acknowledgment of the Jewish, Sinti, and Roma genocides, the recognition of genocides committed by other states, and the exposure of inconsistent action in the case of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, Germany became subject to increasing political cost, particularly reputational costs, due to rhetorical action and public shaming by domestic and international interest groups. German politicians were sensitive to such political costs as evidenced by the respective parliamentary concerns and considered them in their rational decision-making alongside financial costs. When balancing the trade-off between

different foreign policy solutions, namely acknowledgment or non-acknowledgment of colonial crimes, the focus shifted to concerns for increased political costs. Because of these already increased political costs and likely further exposure by interest groups in case of value-inconsistent action feasible policy options were constrained to acts of acknowledgment. German decision-makers were “entrapped” to act consistent with previous value commitments which subsequently led to the acknowledgment of the colonial crimes in the 2021 Joint Declaration.

Interaction of the Mechanisms

Naturally, the question arises as to how both mechanisms interacted with each other. Elements of the rhetorical entrapment mechanism, specifically the exposure of value-inconsistent behavior by domestic and international actors, can be detected at an early stage, notably in the 2006 motion in the National Assembly of Namibia (National Assembly of Namibia, 2006, p. 7). Clear evidence of changing state preferences is only visible in the period before the 2017 election. This chronology allows for two interpretations. First, as the acknowledgment postdates the change in state preferences the rhetorical entrapment mechanism alone was not sufficient to lead to the acknowledgment of the colonial crimes. It was not strong enough individually and needed support from aligned domestic interests and state preferences. Second, elements of the rhetorical entrapment mechanism may have influenced domestic interest formation and thereby state preferences. The exposure of value-inconsistent actions to the German domestic audience likely created awareness and feelings of guilt and responsibility for the colonial past which could have facilitated domestic interests changing state preferences towards reconciliation with the colonial past. The echoing of argumentative patterns already used by the Namibian side in German parliamentary debate is an indication of this. Lastly, it should be noted that the rhetorical entrapment mechanism may have become more powerful as Germany made new and more specific value commitments, such as the 2016 recognition of the Armenian genocide. In this context, Germany’s double

standards became particularly evident, exposed not only by the Namibian side and interest groups but also in German parliamentary debate.

Conclusion

In summary, there is evidence that both proposed causal mechanisms were present in the German-Namibian case. Evolving domestic interests changed German state preferences from ignorance towards reconciliation with the colonial past, culminating in the acknowledgment of the colonial crimes in the 2021 Joint Declaration (*hypothesis 1*). German commitments to values of reconciliation with the past and recognition of genocide and subsequent exposure of value-inconsistent actions through the strategic use of rhetorical entrapment by domestic and international actors increased political cost vis-à-vis financial cost facilitating a rational decision in favor of acknowledging the colonial crimes in the 2021 Joint Declaration (*hypothesis 2*). The mechanisms may have induced and/or reinforced each other. This implies that advocates for reconciliation with the colonial past can effectively employ elements of the rhetorical entrapment mechanism to pursue their interests and pressure governments. Especially in the German context, where state preferences did change toward reconciliation with the past, this may prove successful in advocating for the acknowledgment of other colonial crimes, such as crimes in connection with the Maji Maji rebellion in German East Africa. Considering the relatively short period of colonization and historical trauma from the Holocaust, the German case is however somewhat special compared to other European colonial powers (see Smith, 2020). Therefore, the observations here may not be fully generalizable to other colonial reconciliation processes or even non-colonial crimes. However, since other value commitments than the reconciliation with the Holocaust resonated more strongly with German decision-makers and considering that other European former colonial powers made comparable commitments, similarities are nevertheless to be expected. For example, the UK, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium are all parties to the Genocide Convention and the Geneva Conventions. Furthermore, despite

careful in-depth research, hidden causal mechanisms not analyzed here may have influenced the outcome. If the data and measurements used are not accurate, this could distort the results, which is particularly relevant for the difficult-to-measure state preferences. Future research could address some of these limitations and further our confidence in the conditions of the acknowledgment of colonial crimes by testing the hypotheses on other European former colonial powers or even cases of non-colonial crimes. It may also be worth looking at the interaction of the causal mechanisms in more detail.

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