

ONLY SOME OF THE PAST IS MEMORIALISED

Equality of genocides needed

T L Andrews

“HOW many Jews were killed in the Holocaust?” I ask Kai Splitthoff, a video editor from Berlin. “Four million... no, six million.” The right answer is six. Splitthoff knows the answers to many of my questions about the Holocaust. State education in Germany ensures everyone rehearses this history many times during their school career – complete with a visit to a concentration camp.

Germany’s acknowledgement of the Holocaust stands in stark contrast, however, to their silence regarding their atrocities in Africa. I ask Splitthoff what he knows about killings by Germans in Namibia. “Didn’t we have a colony there?” he asks.

Most Germans do not know about the rebellion among the Herero and Nama of Namibia in the early 1900’s. They also don’t know the name of general Lothar von Throtha who attempted to quash it by banishing the local population to the Kalahari Desert. Those who tried to return were shot. The few water holes in the area were poisoned. An estimated 60 000 people died. Historians say this was the first genocide of the 20th century.

There is very little about these events in German school textbooks, newspapers and even museums. Until now. The controversial re-construction of the Prussian royal palace in Berlin promises to reshape public consciousness on the issue. An Africa exhibition is planned inside that will, among other things, address the Namibian genocide.

The exhibition raises important questions about public history. Who is remembered and why? How does one even begin to broach the telling of a history so brutal and what does doing so, or not, mean politically?

There is widespread reticence by German authorities to recognise what happened in Namibia as genocide. Professor Juergen Zimmerer of Hamburg University said: “The national government is hesitant to acknowledge it, I believe, primarily out of fear of calls for reparations.”

Calling it a genocide and beginning to pay out would set a very costly precedent for other European powers with blood on their hands, Zimmerer said. Ironically, the very same German parliament that refuses to acknowledge the Namibian genocide is pushing Turkey to acknowledge its own.

Germans do not really have “white guilt” as it is commonly experienced in the US, Britain or South Africa. The typical discomfort that manifests when white people are confronted with their privilege.

Their consciences are clear as far as Africa is concerned. The extermination of the Jews has left such a large mark of shame on their souls that there is almost no space left for other guilt. “The Holocaust overshadows almost everything else,” Zimmerer said. “Germans are afraid that publicly calling anything else a genocide would relativise the Holocaust. In the collective German consciousness, genocide and the Holocaust are almost synonymous.”

According to Zimmerer the denial also has an obvious racial dimension. That the white Jewish victims are acknowledged while the black African ones are not is hard to overlook. But the racism goes a level deeper.

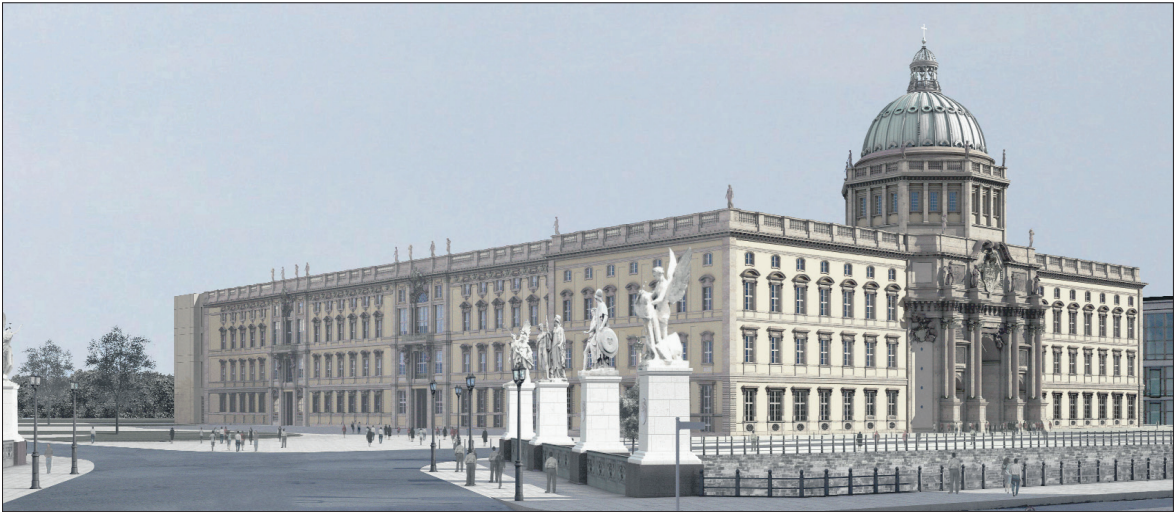
While the consensus is that the Holocaust was thoroughly “bad”, a belief persists that colonialism served humanity in some way, mitigating German compunction on the issue. “The Western belief that it (colonialism) was a ‘civilising mission’ is still present,” said Zimmerer.

Arguably more globally influen-



INTIMIDATING: The Field of Stelae Holocaust Memorial is a 19 000m2 memorial covered with 2 711 concrete slabs located at the edge of Tiergarten.

Picture: MARKO PRISKE



LANDMARK: View of the Berlin Palace from the northwest side.

Picture: BERLIN PALACE HUMBOLDTFORUM FOUNDATION



TOUCHING: The Room of Dimensions has diaries, letters, postcards and the last news received from the victims, written during the persecution.

Picture: MARKO PRISKE

tial events took place in Berlin per square kilometre than anywhere else. The site on which the Prussian palace is being built, for instance, is where the former East German parliament stood.

I walk 300m westwards from there to the Brandenburg Gate, where the Berlin wall divided a city, a nation, a continent and the world.

Around 200m from there I pass Hitler’s bunker. Today it is an unas-

suming parking lot. If it were not for a small sign one would walk past the place where Hitler developed military strategies, hid from the allies and, finally, took his life.

I walk just 50m from the bunker to reach Wilhelmstraße 77, where European powers met in 1884 to carve up Africa.

The German Kaiser, Otto von Bismarck, hosted the meeting in which colonial powers arbitrarily

called “shotgun” for chunks of a continent.

The building later ended up on the communist side of the Berlin wall. There it was converted into apartment blocks for the elite, “more equal” party members. Today it is a restaurant.

In a city saturated with historic sights how does one go about creating an exhibition that, for many, will be their first impression of the German presence in Africa?

The curators of the exhibition, Paola Ivanov and Jonathan Fine, are aware of this large responsibility and hope to make a lasting impact while being careful to not perpetuate problematic images of Africa.

“It would be a big mistake if the only impressions people got of Africa were the stereotypical ones. Africa as a victim, solely as a victim of mass murder, oppression, slavery etc. It is clear that we need to include these issues. But merely representing Africa as a victim is not the goal of our exhibition,” Fine said.

The curators are planning to exhibit artefacts from the cultural and social history of diverse African regions including Benin, Cameroon and parts of East Africa. “We would like to revise this image of Africa as an ahistorical place,

It is important to us to recount the brutality that began in the 19th century with colonialism, which forms the roots of the brutality in the 20th century

isolated in time and space. We want to present Africa as an agent within global history,” Ivanov said.

Despite the exhibition’s broad aims, Ivanov realises there is inherent value in frankly addressing Europe’s mistreatment of Africa – in breaking silence.

“It is important to us to recount the brutality that began in the 19th century with colonialism, which formed the roots of the brutality that continued in the 20th century. We want to really show that it was not something peripheral that happened,” Ivanov said.

In that respect understanding colonial Germany becomes key to understanding Nazi Germany.

“The idea of the ‘pure German nation’ was first put into practice in Namibia,” said Zimmerer. “It was interrupted in 1915 but was taken up again in 1933 in a new geographical location and with new victims.”

The racist root remains the same and as such the Third Reich can be seen as an extension of colonial thought.

The details of the exhibition are still uncertain. It is only set to open in 2019. Till then the curators are garnering inspiration from other museums and exhibitions that have dealt with genocide: specifically Jewish museums.

I walk just 50 more metres from Wilhelmstraße 77 to the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe,” commonly known as the Holocaust memorial. It is an intimidating structure made up of concrete slabs that form a maze across a city block. The monoliths tower around me, causing me to lose my orientation in a grey haze.

Intuitively I understand that my feeling of being lost is just a glimmer of the disorientation the Jews

must have felt being sent off to concentration camps in a Europe gone mad.

The architect tasked with memorialising this dreadful event, Peter Eisenman, intended to create the experience of disorientation, choosing to avoid literal representations in the design.

“The Holocaust is beyond representing, beyond symbol,” Eisenman said. Besides the feeling of being lost, he is quick to add that he did not have a set meaning or interpretation in mind when constructing the memorial.

“I wasn’t trying to do anything that had to do with the preservation of memory, I was trying to do something that would make an experience in the present.”

I ask Eisenman how he would design a memorial to the Herero and Nama killed in Namibia. He seems uncomfortable with the premise of the question, wondering whether a memorial would be the right approach at all. He sighs, overwhelmed by all the massacres in history that would theoretically need memorials.

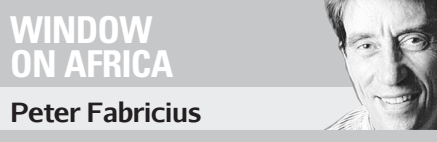
“I don’t think we should become a culture of memorials. We should build for the future, rather than remember past.”

The fact remains that some parts of the past are memorialised while others are not. Deciding who is worthy of remembering and who should be forgotten is a political endeavour.

Until Germany, and indeed the rest of Europe, take an honest look at the politics behind their selection and omission, the inequality among genocides will remain a manifestation of broader inequality in the world.

● Andrews is a South African journalist living in Berlin.

Critical parting of ways with international justice?



SOUTH AFRICA seems to have reached a moment of truth with its decision to allow Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir to visit the country to attend the African Union (AU) summit in Sandton.

In doing so, South Africa disregarded its obligation to the International Criminal Court (ICC), which has indicted Bashir for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

The ANC government has been balancing on a knife-edge for a long time between its often competing commitments to African solidarity and to international law – and South Africa’s own constitution. The dilemma has been acutely illustrated by South Africa’s position on the ICC. It was a founding member of the court. But as the AU has steadily parted ways with the ICC, South Africa has been stretched ever wider between its two competing interests.

After the ICC indicted Bashir, the AU, angered both by the court’s indictment of a sitting African head of state and by a feeling that it was picking on Africans (all of its cases so far have been against Africans), issued an instruction to all AU member states not to co-operate with the court. South African presidents attending AU summits were implicitly party to this decision. And it was pretty much during the same period that the South African government twice stated publicly that it would have to arrest Bashir under its ICC obligations, if he set foot in South Africa. The first time was when he was due to visit for the first inauguration of President Jacob Zuma in 2009 and the second time was in 2010 when due to visit for the World Cup.

Then the ICC indicted Kenyan Uhuru Kenyatta – before he was elected president – for alleged complicity in orchestrating political violence after his country’s 2007 elections. That further infuriated the AU, which launched an attempt to persuade the ICC to exempt sitting presidents. This time Zuma explicitly backed that initiative. But it failed.

Now we have seen Pretoria apparently taking sides clearly between the ICC and the AU. That has large implications, diplomatically and constitutionally. Yesterday, the Pretoria High Court issued an interim order to the authorities not to allow Bashir to leave South Africa, pending the court’s decision on whether to issue an order to them to arrest Bashir. That latter judgment is expected today.

At time of writing, there were strong rumours that Bashir was likely to flee before the Pretoria High Court issued its final order: Whatever happened, South African officials were adamant that they would neither prevent Bashir from leaving nor arrest him if he tried to leave. In either case South Africa would be in breach of its obligations to the UN, to the ICC – and, more importantly, to its own law. That introduces the most alarming aspect of this saga, that Pretoria may have provoked something like a constitutional crisis by flouting its own law.

For the Rome Statute of the ICC has been incorporated into South Africa’s own law as the ICC Implementation Act which imposes a domestic obligation to the government to honour its ICC obligations. And if it ignores the interim order of the Pretoria High Court, or an order that might still come to arrest Bashir, that would aggravate its offence.

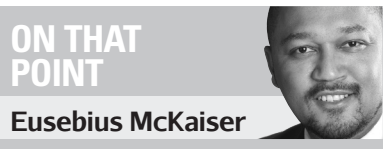
Pretoria met the ICC in The Hague on Friday to try to persuade it to give South Africa an exemption from its obligation to arrest Bashir, on the grounds that he should enjoy diplomatic immunity because he was attending an AU summit.

The ICC rejected this request. This prompted the ANEC to say that the ICC was no longer serving a useful purpose. This suggests that South Africa may pull out of the ICC. That would mark a critical parting of the ways with international justice.

Mocking those who can’t pronounce ‘Nkandla’ really rejecting accountability

I GOT zero for my first English Language oral test in Standard 6 back in 1992. There was no way in hell I was going to stand up in front of white kids and speak in my terrible coloured accent, mangled English grammar and be the butt of jokes. I simply refused, sitting at my desk, and the teacher let me off the hook, mercifully.

This fear of speaking with an accent that might be mocked, or making grammatical mistakes that may result in boys laughing at me, haunted me during my first year at Graeme College Boys’ High. Model-C schools had basically just been established and I had gone from an Afrikaans primary school to an English school despite hardly being able



to speak the Queen’s language.

Other boys from the township had similar experiences. I’ll never forget a confident boy debating with the history teacher whether the teacher was wrong about how to say and spell “barbed wire” or whether this black boy was right. I cringed at my classmate’s mistake, but secretly wished I had his confidence to be so loudly wrong in front of the class.

Harold insisted that Mr Grant was wrong and that the proper word

is “bob” and not “barbed”! I didn’t know whose side to pick. Mr Grant was very clever and my hero who introduced me to academic philosophy at that young age. So he must be right, I thought. On the other hand, I knew that my dad is clever too and, like Harold, when dad erected new fencing at home he had called it “bob wire” too!

I was extremely competitive and set out to deal with this accent-embarrassment. I joined the debate club for the sole purpose of learning to speak better English and to never get zero again for a class oral. I was also determined to beat the white kids at English, and that goal was achieved by matric when I got the prize for English and a distinction in

the subject.

But it was a long journey. Mrs Whitehead, the librarian, helped me get rid of my flat vowels. At the back of the school library after school was out. I had to attend lots of debate classes and tournaments. And I had to practise the colloquial speech not found in books, like “sarmie”, “oke”, and other bits of cultural grammar.

But, dammit, you can’t guarantee your real self won’t betray itself when you’ve had too much to drink or when you’re not on your accent-guard! It is tough worrying about how to speak like others whose accents seem to have social value worth tapping into.

I’m recalling this horrible South

African reality of learning to speak the grammar of whiteness in the light of Willie Madisha mocking Naledi Pandor’s accent with his bizarre “HONG! HONG! HONG!”-outburst in Parliament. The only thing scarier was the facial contortions he put on display while performing this poor imitation. It was less funny than just bizarre, to be honest, and rather stupid looking.

It is also why those of us who learnt the grammar of whiteness knew that there were no guarantees that such fluency would make you look cool at home. I dreaded, in the days before cellphones allowed you to run away from the scene to speak out of earshot, getting a call from white friends and being told by a cousin

there’s someone on the landline who wants to speak to me. That meant having to speak English in our bedroom where the phone was and my cousins or granny listening to me speaking “like a white person”. Accent-policing is a cruel business.

What’s interesting both about Willie Madisha’s “HONG!”-madness and the president’s now (in) famous “NKAAAAANDLA!”-mock of those who can’t pronounce African words accurately is that mocking is clearly a South African sport across class, linguistic and political lines.

This is a dangerous game we are playing. It represents the worst attempt to deflect attention away from argument and on to the person who is making the argument. It is

simply an obsession with playing the person as substitute for evidence-based reasoning and logical deconstruction on what they have to say. It aims to demean, to delegitimise and to silence. It is cruel, ungenerous and contributes to an impoverished public discourse.

We have such a rich history of laughing in the face of adversity that one doesn’t want to reduce the space for laughter.

But we must distinguish innocent laughter from poisonous attempts to halt conversation about serious matters like Nkandla.

When President Zuma mocked his critics, he wasn’t aiming to merely poke fun. He was rejecting accountability. And that’s not funny.