

SWAPO'S VERSION OF HISTORY IN NAMIBIA

Pavel MIŠKAŘÍK

University of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava

J. Herdu 2, Trnava, 917 01, Slovakia

p.miskarik@gmail.com

This study aims to explain how the history of Namibia is shaped by the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), the political party which has led the fight for Namibia's independence for several decades and remains in power up to the present. This political party represented the most effective way for an oppressed people to express their unwillingness to live under the repressive conditions of the apartheid regime of South Africa. The ideas of ultimate liberation from all kinds of oppression and the empowerment of all people were rooted in SWAPO's constitution. However, during the years of armed struggle and exile, the party itself punished very harshly its own members and controlled all aspects of the life of its subjects. There are several recorded accounts of the abuse of power by SWAPO's elites and even rape cases. Unlike in South Africa, SWAPO instead of national reconciliation decided to forget those events and highlighted the atrocities committed by their enemies. In fact, SWAPO is attempting to create its own version of history, glorifying its role in national liberation. An independence memorial museum, Heroes' Acre or a biography of Sam Nujoma are tokens of this practice. In this study, I compare some of the official versions of history with external sources covering the stories which the government is trying so desperately to silence. These practices may be called negative historical revisionism or historical negativism and, to a certain degree, they affect the identity of Namibians.

Keywords: historical revisionism, historical negationism, national history, Namibia, SWAPO, history, politics, reconciliation, national identity, liberation struggle

Introduction

The main goal of the article is to describe the way in which official representatives of independent Namibia are trying to shape national history. The country gained its independence only in 1991 as a result of international negotiations and a lengthy armed struggle for liberation. SWAPO was the political party which led the fight for independence. It won the elections and it has remained in power ever since. The country is democratic and public support

for SWAPO has been increasing since independence. The party gained its legacy as the leading force in the liberation war. It is probably the narrative about the liberation struggle which helps the party to preserve its support, even though it does not manage to fulfil the goals outlined in its' constitution. There are many acute problems which the country is facing. There are persistent reports of abuses of power by the party dating back as far as the 1960s and on-going up until the present. The party has decided to deny all of these accusations and act as an authoritarian party in some cases. The goal of the article is not to discredit SWAPO's contribution to the liberation of the country. However, some of the practices of the party can be interpreted as negative historical revisionism or even historical denial. Due to those practices some of historians writing about Namibian history are following SWAPO's version of account, while others are open to question the practices of the party or their version of historical events of the liberation struggle and their role in it. Because of this, discrepancy in attempt to describe certain events can be found in most of the books focused on history of Namibia. For that purpose, the first section seeks to provide the reader with a non-aligned brief introduction to Namibia's history. The second section is devoted to the theory of historical negationism. In the third section, which is followed by a conclusion, I describe specific examples of the discrepancy between the official version of history and other sources.

A Brief Introduction to the History of Namibia

Before the arrival of the first European settlers, the territory of Namibia was home to several ethnic groups such as the Herero, Nama, Himba, Owambo, Kavango, Damara, San, etc¹... From the 19th century onwards, the presence of settlers of European origin became substantial. On 5 September 1884, Germany incorporated the territory into its empire as a colony. The territory was named German South West Africa (*Deutsch-Südwestafrika*).² During this period, Germany tried to influence the outcome of Herero-Nama wars because they wanted to weaken both of those influential and large ethnic groups. Another means of gaining influence for Germans in the territory was unfair trade deals with locals. After the outbreak of a rinderpest epidemic in 1896, the situation of

¹ For a detailed account of ethnology and early history of these tribes, see VEDDER, H. *South-West Africa in Early Times*.

² For a detailed account of events during the colonial period see FIRST, R. *South-West Africa*.

the largest ethnic group on the territory, the Herero, became even worse. Because they mostly relied on their cattle as a means of subsistence, they were forced to sell their land to Germans and they lost their self-sufficiency. This situation led to an uprising by the Herero, during which they killed all German adult males they found. As a result of these events, the German emperor, William II, sent General Lothar von Trotha with reinforcements to South-West Africa. In August 1904, they managed to surround a large group of approximately 8,000 Herero, including woman and children, on Waterberg plateau. Most of the Herero were killed in the battle, the rest died as a result of dehydration after retreating into the Kalahari Desert. In October 1904, Lothar von Trotha issued a *Vernichtungsbefehl* (extermination order), which ordered the killing of any Herero on German territory. The Nama, the second largest ethnic group on the territory also decided to resist German rule, and they carried out several guerrilla attacks on German posts. This resistance did not have any significant results and led to mass arrests of the Nama people. Members of Nama and Herero ethnic groups were jailed in camps at Shark Island, which are considered to be the first concentration camps in history. The results of German policy in South-West Africa affected the ethnic composition of territory. According to a population census from 1911, only 9,800 Namas, out of 20,000, survived the genocide and only 15,000 Hereros, out of 80,000.

In February 1915, the armed forces of South Africa, Great Britain's ally, entered the territory of South-West Africa. German forces surrendered in July of the same year. In June 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was signed. In its article 119, the territory of South-West Africa was officially assigned to the administration of Allied forces by the League of Nations. They entrusted South Africa with the administration of the territory. South Africa had a type C mandate: it was expected to have full administrative and legislative control over the territory until the people of the country were ready to take this responsibility upon themselves.³

After World War II, the League of Nations was transformed into the United Nations, which was still responsible for the administration of South-West Africa. Shortly after WW II, the prime minister of South Africa Jan Christiaan Smuts wanted to officially incorporate the territory into his country as the fifth province of South Africa. In 1945 – 46, he even ordered a referendum in the country. Hosea Kutako, the chief of the Herero, openly opposed this attempt and with the help of Michael Scott he sent an official complaint to the UN. In December 1946, the UN rejected South Africa's request to incorporate the

³ For a detailed account of the mandate see KEULDER, Ch. *State, Society and Democracy, a Reader in Namibian Politics*, p. 53–54.

territory. From 1948, after the success of the radical National Party in South Africa, apartheid laws were officially applied on the territory. However, racial discrimination was a part of everyday life for most of the Namibians even before the introduction of those laws. This move made the situation official. Laws such as the Group Areas Act (1950), the Industrial Conciliation Ordinance (1952), the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1953), the Population Registration Act (1953), the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953) or the Bantu Education Act (1953)⁴ were introduced in South-West Africa. The enforcement of those laws was not as strict as in South Africa. This was probably because in the territory of South West Africa political opposition to the regime was marginal, or non-existent, in contrast with the rurally more developed South Africa. The first political opposition of Namibians was formed in the barbershop at 35 Somerset Road, Cape Town in 1957.⁵ It was the Owamboland People's Congress (OPC) and supposed to represent the demand of Owambo migrant workers. After several months internal tensions grew in this organization, as a result of which it fragmented. In the following years, two important political organizations emerged from the OPC: the South-West Africa National Union (SWANU) and South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO). However, neither of these parties was allowed to participate in the country's election in 1949. The election was reserved only for the white population. The election was won by the South-West Africa – National Party (SWA-NP), which strengthened the enforcement of apartheid laws and encouraged even more settlers of European origin to enter the territory.

When in 1959 South Africa's officials tried to relocate the coloured population from the center of Windhoek into the township of Katutura, public discontent grew into an open protest. During the demonstration, police opened fire on protestors. Several protestors were injured and some killed. In 1960, SWAPO officially published the constitution of the party, in which the main goals were the establishment of an independent government and equality for all of its citizens. In 1963, SWAPO joined an alliance with SWANU which took the name of the South-West Africa Liberation Front (SWALF). The alliance was short-lived. Afterwards, SWAPO came up with a plan to organize armed resistance against South Africa. The military wing of the party was named the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). The Organization of African Union (OAU) recognized SWAPO as the official representative of Namibia

⁴ For more information about racial laws see WALLACE, M. *A History of Namibia from the Beginning to 1990*, p. 250–251.

⁵ DOBELL, L. *SWAPO's Struggle for Namibia, 1960 – 1991: War by Other Means*, p. 28.

because of its willingness to take up arms against South Africa. SWAPO, in this period of its history, also gained the support of the Herero Chief's Council and the Damara Tribal Executive Committee.

In 1953, the Permanent Committee of South-West Africa was created by resolution 749A of the UN. Its main goal was to supervise compliance with the official mandate of South Africa over the territory. In 1960, the committee wanted to send a commissioner to investigate how South Africa was administering the entrusted territory, but South Africa rejected the entry of the UN's commissioner. In 1960, Liberia and Ethiopia filed a case against South Africa at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in which they accused South Africa of illegal action on the territory of Namibia. In 1966, the ICJ came to a verdict in which it stated that Ethiopia and Liberia did not have the right to file the case. In the same year, the UN General Assembly decided to end the mandate of South Africa over the territory in Resolution 2145/1966. They decided to set up the United Nations Council for South-West Africa, which was legally responsible for administering Namibia until independence, but South Africa's occupation did not allow it to fulfil its goal.

Because of growing tension in the UN and political opposition in the country, South Africa decided to enforce the so-called Ondendaal plan over the territory. The long-term intention of this plan was to divide the country into twelve separate territories, which were to be given to specific ethnic groups. The homelands would be theoretically independent and the rest of the territory would be incorporated into South Africa.

SWAPO's first exile camp was established in 1964 at Kongwa in Tanzania.⁶ Roughly one hundred of SWAPO supporters lived there. In 1965, other liberation movements, such as OUA, MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), and ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union), created camps in the same area. SWAPO received international support mostly from the USSR and China. Egypt, Algeria, Ghana, and North Korea also helped the organization, mostly with the training of personnel.

In the early 60s, the general public in Namibia did not have any information about SWAPO's military ambitions. Some of them decided to go into exile because they wanted to gain a better education. However, when they arrived at SWAPO's headquarters in Dar es Salaam, those who did not meet the requirements for study were transferred to Kongwa, where they were trained to participate in combat. This resulted in the discontent of some inhabitants of the camp. In 1965, Silas Shikongo complained about the situation in a letter to Sam

⁶ WILLIAMS, Ch. *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa – A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps*, p. 4.

Nujoma, but he was subsequently arrested and jailed for six months. Afterward, fifty inhabitants of the camp fled to Kenya, where they applied for scholarships.

According to some sources, SWAPO began the armed struggle for independence with the infiltration of their soldiers into the territory of Namibia in 1964. Until 26 August 1966 there were no direct or indirect clashes between PLAN and South African troops. During the first clash, a small group of poorly armed PLAN soldiers fought against military helicopters and professional soldiers of South Africa. Apart from heavy casualty on PLAN's side, this action was followed by the accelerated approval of the Terrorist Act, which was used during a trial against thirty-five SWAPO members arrested in Namibia shortly after the first fight. Those convicts were imprisoned in Robben Island prison.

Deteriorating conditions in the country resulted in increases in the signs of public dissatisfaction with the apartheid regime. On 13 December 1971, more than 13,500 employees began a general strike. The main reason for the strike was the unequal position of "coloured" workers in the labour market. With the help of the Ministry of Bantu Affairs the strike ended within a few weeks but the promises made during the negotiations remained unfulfilled. In the 70s and 80s, several other strikes occurred.

On 12 December 1973, SWAPO was recognized by the UN as the only official representative of the people of Namibia by resolution 3111. When Angola achieved its independence in 1974, SWAPO decided to move most of its camps to Angola. This move made it easier for people from Namibia to go into exile, and together with severe repression this powered the move of approximately 4,000 to 6,000 Namibians. Many exiles were politically active even before their emigration, mostly as SWAPO Youth League (SYL) members. Because of this large influx to SWAPO exile camps, the party had to face many difficulties in providing sufficient supplies to the camps, as well as managing the population of the camps. The shortage of basic commodities made for unfair practices in the redistribution of goods by the commanders of camps. I will describe some of those practices in the following sections.

After the arrival in exile, most of the SYL members were sent to Mehemba camp. They were dissatisfied with the situation in the camps. They send a complaint to SWAPO headquarters in Lusaka, in which they demanded a democratic party congress and military training for themselves. Most of the camp inhabitants agreed with these demands and even higher-ranking officers of SWAPO signed the letter. Afterward, the camp inhabitants were transferred to Old Farm camp close to Lusaka. SWAPO accused them of spying for South Africa and on 21 April 1976 the Zambian army surrounded the camp and arrested 27 SWAPO SYL members. They were imprisoned in Moboroma camp. The rest of the camp's inhabitants were disarmed and transferred to Central Base camp, where they were held with no weapons and restrictions on their

movements. They were imprisoned for 3 years and were released as a result of growing international pressure on the organization. Everybody who was accused of spying for South Africa was consequently interrogated by SWAPO Security. The interrogations became a means in the hands of SWAPO of dealing with dissension in the camps. The accusations of abuse of power emerged during the period of the liberation struggle. However, there was a lack of direct evidence and nobody was willing or able to carry out a serious investigation into those events.

Some of the accusations made by the SYL members related to the practice by which SWAPO seniors used their role in the redistribution of goods among the camp's inhabitants, to gain "popularity" among young women. According to the book by *Martha Akawa* some of the camp's commanders had as many as 18 children.⁷ Most of the children were removed from their mothers when they reached the age of two and were raised in a community nursery. For this reason, the children were not perceived as illegitimate children, but they were considered to be children of SWAPO.

In 1976, the UN began negotiations about the first free elections in South-West Africa. For the first time the UN officially used the term Namibia for the territory. As a result of negotiations, the UN came up with resolution 385, which was rejected by South Africa. South Africa came up with its own version called resolution 435/1978. The main difference between the two was the fact that South Africa intended to keep control over the country even during the transition period and elections, and the UN's authorities would only provide for overseeing the elections. On 1 September 1977, South Africa also officially annexed Walvis Bay, the city which was the only deep-water port of Namibia.

On 4 May 1978, the forces of the South Africa Defence Force (SADF) launched operation Reindeer. During this operation, the attack on Cassinga camp was launched. There were no more than a hundred soldiers in the camp during the attack. More than 600 Namibians were killed, mostly women and children. During operation Reindeer, an attack on Chetequera camp was also carried out. In Chetequera, the military presence was more significant. 200 prisoners were taken during this operation and were imprisoned in Hardap prison until 1984. South Africa in a media release used pictures from Chetequera to justify its actions because more soldiers and military equipment were stationed in this camp. SWAPO claimed that Cassinga was a refugee camp and consequently demanded international aid for its refugees. Countries in the Eastern bloc, SWAPO's traditional supporters, decided to take care of some of

⁷ For more information about the environment of the camps see AKAWA, M. *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*.

SWAPO's refugees, mainly infants. Those children were expected to gain a better education in comparison with children stationed in exile camps and children in Namibia. On 12 September 1979⁸, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) accepted a resolution concerning acceptance of those child refugees. GDR accepted 427 children between 1979 and 1989.⁹ Czechoslovakia in a resolution from October 1985¹⁰ accepted 56 Namibian children on 14 November 1985.¹¹

In 1978 an election to the Constitutional Assembly of Namibia took place, but SWAPO boycotted it. The election did not take place in the most densely populated region of Namibia – Ovamboland. This was because most of the

⁸ Maßnahmeplan zur Verwirklichung des Beschlusses des Sekretariats des ZK der SED vom 12.9.1979 über die Errichtung eines Kinderheimes für namibische Vorschulkinde DR2/12321a.

⁹ For more information about Namibian children in the GDR, see KENNA, C. *The "GDR-Children" of Namibia: Homecomers in an Unknown Country*; KRAUSE, J. *Das DDR-Namibia-Solidaritätsprojekt "Schule der Freundschaft": Möglichkeiten und Grenzen interkultureller Erziehung*; NIEKREZEN, Y., ARMBRUSTER, Ch., WITTE, M. *A Problematic Sense of Belonging, a Media Analysis of the "GDR Children of Namibia"*. In *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture*, 2014, Vol. 15, pp. 95–123; OWENS, J. *Namibia's "GDR Kids": Multiple Displacement, Identity and Assimilation in a Post-Apartheid State*. In *The Journal of International Children's Literature*, 1999, Vol. 37 No. 2, pp. 24–29; OWENS, J. *Blood Ties and Tongue Ties: The Role of Children in Shifting the Boundaries of Namibia's German-Speaking Community*. In *The Journal of History of Childhood and Youth*, 2008, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 232–249; SCHMITT, C., KLEIN-ZIMMER, K., WITTE, M. *Growing Up Transnationally between SWAPO and GDR – a Biographical Ethnographic Study on Namibian Refugee Children*. In *Transnational Social Review*, 2014, Vol. 3, pp. 28–33; SCHMITT, C., WITTE M., POLAT, S. *International Solidarity in the GDR and Transnationality: an Analysis of Primary School Materials from Namibian Child Refugees*. In *Transnational Social Review – A Social Work Journal*, 2014, Vol. 4, Nos 2/3, pp. 242– 258; SCHMITT, C., WITTE, M. *You Are Special: Othering in Biographies of GDR Children from Namibia*. In *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2018, Vol. 41, No. 7, pp. 1352–1369.

¹⁰ National archive Prague, NA, A ÚV KSČ, f.02/1. P142/85, k inf.3, č.9746/23, from 30 October 1985.

¹¹ For more information about this group, see: MACHALÍK, T. *Czechoslovakia on the Battlefield of the Cold War, the Angolan Civil War and the "Namibian Czechs"*. In *Viva Africa 2007. Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on African Studies*, 2007, pp. 205–220; MACHALÍK, T. *SWAPO Children in Czechoslovakia from the Past to the Present*. In *Viva Africa 2008. Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on African Studies*, 2008, pp. 280–293.

traditional SWAPO supporters, Ovambos, lived in this region. The Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) supported by South Africa won the elections. During the DTA's administration, some of the apartheid laws were abandoned and others relaxed. It was a result of growing international tension and also political tendencies inside South Africa itself. In 1979, the DTA passed, for instance, the Abolition of Racial Discrimination Act. However, the implementation of these reforms was not followed up in reality.

From 1974 onwards, recruitment of soldiers of Namibian origins was made possible. In the 80s, the number of Namibians enlisted into South African forces grew rapidly. Some of them formed the notoriously cruel Koevet unit, which operated mostly in the north of Namibia and took action against PLAN, SWAPO supporters, and Namibian civilians. Most of the Koevet members were of San origin, an ethnic group which was traditionally marginalized with low social status.

The most important battle in the liberation struggle of Namibia was fought by PLAN members alongside the Angolan MPLA and Cuban troops against South Africa and UNITA. The battle of Cuito Cuanavele took place in August 1985, and after several days of fighting, it ended in a stalemate. This battle was not only part of the Angolan civil war but also of the Cold War itself. UNITA was supported mostly by western powers and their direct ally was South Africa. On the other side, there was the MPLA representing the interests of countries of the Eastern Bloc and directly supported by Cuban soldiers and SWAPO. After more than a decade of costly warfare and the result of Cuito Cuanavele, neither side were willing to continue with the war and negotiations began.

In 1976, the so-called Western Contact Group (WCG) was created to negotiate the conditions of Namibia's independence. Great Britain, Germany, France, USA, and Canada were members of the WCG. In the 80s, the WCG formulated a requirement: Cuban troops had to withdraw from Angola. Official negotiations concerning the independence of Namibia began in May 1988. South Africa, Cuba, and Angola decided to accept resolution 435. As a result of this agreement, SWAPO was no longer considered to be an official representative of Namibia. They were not invited to any subsequent negotiation. On the 1 February 1989, the country officially entered the transition period and on 1 April SWAPO and South Africa agreed to a ceasefire. One of the conditions of those negotiations was the demilitarization of PLAN and SWATF. SWAPO sent its PLAN soldiers to the territory of Namibia, where they intended to hand their weapons over to the UN. However, because SWAPO was excluded from the negotiations and had not consulted about their move with others, SWATF considered the presence of armed PLAN soldiers as a threat and opened fire. Approximately 250 soldiers were killed on both sides. Fortunately, this event did not have any impact on peace negotiation and the first free

elections in the country took place from 7 to 11 November 1989. SWAPO decided to bring most of their supporters out of exile. There were as many as 42,736 of them. SWAPO won the elections with 57.3% of the vote, and in Ovamboland alone they gained 92% support. Because SWAPO did not gain two-thirds of the vote necessary for a constitutional majority, the opposition parties participated in the process of constitution-making as well. The DTA was the most influential opposition party with 28.6% of the vote in the first election. The country was officially declared independent on 21 March 1990; Sam Nujoma became its first president.

After independence, SWAPO transformed its rhetoric from the socialist-oriented movement into a democratic political party. The country has one of the most democratic and liberal constitutions in the world. SWAPO managed to alter the constitution, shortly before the second term of Sam Nujoma ended, which allowed him to run for the presidency for the third time. Political support for SWAPO reached two-thirds of the majority in the second election and they managed to hold on to public support. The main goals of the party remained unfulfilled because most of the people of Namibia lived under the poverty line and they did not have the same opportunities as the others. General empowerment of the people did not happen and some ethnic groups are victims of marginalization and indirect oppression. For instance, suppression of political opposition in the Caprivi region may be given as an example.¹²

Methodology

The information contained in the article was collected during long-term field research which was carried out in Namibia and the Czech Republic between 2017 and 2018. The main aim of this research was to collect materials necessary for biographies focused on the specific group of Namibians who were raised in Czechoslovakia in the period 1985 –1991. The combination of a biographical, historical and ethnographic approach was used in the research. Several different research techniques were utilized in the research, such as biographical and semi-structured interviews, analysis of archival material, media reports, personal documents, and photography or participant observations or focus groups. I have recorded 35 interviews, most of them with group members, caregivers, the director of a boarding school, Czech adoptive families and Czech and Namibian

¹² For more detailed information about this case and several others, see MELBER, H. *Understanding Namibia – The Trials of Independence*.

government representatives. In this article, most of the information comes from media reports, biographical interviews and secondary literature.

Theoretical Approach

Memory and history are powerful actors, which shape individual identity and reality in a very surrogate way. Maurice Halbwachs¹³ was probably the first scholar who systematically studied memory as a social phenomenon. In his works, he describes the ways in which all information is subjected to collective framing. Memories which are accepted by the broader society in which individuals live, become part of the so-called collective memory. The participation in the reproduction of this information is in a certain way an indicator of individual identity. In his works, Halbwachs understands any memory about the past as being socially constructed. For that reason, he believed that the collective memory is in a certain sense contrary to history because the main goal of history is to produce accurate and objective information whereas the collective memory adjusts events in favour of certain groups. Jan Assmann¹⁴ in his work follows up Halbwachs's ideas and describes in detail the way in which individual memory is transferred into the collective one in the example of early civilizations and the way in which some historical accounts and concepts of history itself are made.

Despite some of the claims made by Halbwachs and Assmann, I believe that most of the time scientific historiography tends to describe historical events as objectively as possible. It is only some so-called historiographers who try to manipulate historical events to try to enforce their versions of historical events, in order to gain their own goals. This tendency was named "*négationnisme*" – negationism by the French historian Henry Rousso in his book *The Vichy Syndrome*.¹⁵ Negationism is sometimes mistakenly linked to legitimate historical revisionism, but unlike revisionism, it uses illegitimate means to distort history for specific purposes. Rousso labels the Holocaust denial a typical example of historical negationism. The most common techniques for historical negationism are the use of false documents as legitimate sources, quoting out of historical context, the mistranslation of texts, manipulation of statistics, falsifying information, obscuring the truth, trivialization, relativization, inventing clever but implausible reasons for distrusting certain

¹³ HALBWACHS, M. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.

¹⁴ ASSMANN, J. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisations*.

¹⁵ ROUSSO, H. *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1914*.

historical records etc. Historical negationism is used to gain ideological and political influence. Because history is an inseparable part of any national identity, the negative revision of history can create a specific ideological identity. In that case, if some negations or negative revisions of history are promoted by national elites, for instance by a change of curriculum in the school system, those ideas became accepted by the general public very quickly. By means of historical negationism transferring of war guilt, denial of abuses of power or providing an illusion of victory are made possible. Holocaust denial, Confederate revisionism, Japanese war crime negationism, Serbia war crime negationism, Armenian genocide denial, denial of Soviet crimes, China's denial of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, or the manufacturing of Macedonian history are the most notorious examples of such practices. Apart from the political goals of certain groups, some people may use historical negationism as a medium for achieving personal fame. The consequences of historical negationism vary and in some cases they may even have a positive impact on certain communities. The ultimate goal for any historian or scholar in general, must be the pursuit of objective truth, even if such a thing as an objective history is utopian, especially if we take into account specific schools of thought which occurred after 1960s such as deconstructionism or postmodernism. I agree with them to the extent that there are several different interpretations of historical accounts. Nevertheless, I also believe that it is very important to point out obvious historical manipulations.

Questionable Interpretations of Historical Events in Namibia

After the successful struggle for the country's independence, SWAPO changed from being a liberation movement into political party and it managed to gain a great deal of support among the general public. In this section, I describe how SWAPO deliberately influences the way in which the history of the country's liberation struggle and other historical events are presented.

I begin with the example of the Independence Memorial Museum, which was inaugurated on 21 March 2014. It dominates the country's capital and it presents historical events prior countries independence. The stunning installations in the museum probably captivate most visitors and their main aim is to glorify the armed struggle for independence. An exhibition devoted to the period before colonial domination is also located in the museum. A large inscription is located in this section and it states: "Pre-colonial society, peaceful co-existence". As a matter of fact, this section did not have as many artifacts as the others and there is also very little accompanying text. The phrase has an obvious purpose in this exhibition: to create an image in the eyes of potential

visitors that before the arrival of settlers of European origin, a community on the territory lived in peace. In fact at least seven different ethnic groups were living on the territory and arrived in it at different periods in time. For instance, some, as a result of so-called Bantu expansion, show clearly that there were at least some conflicts in the area. As a piece of clear evidence against the museum's claim, I will use the written record of the Herero-Nama wars, which occurred even before the arrival of European settlers. Ruth Benedict describes those events in her historical account of the country. For example, she quotes Chief Witboii's (Nama) letter to the Chief of the Herero, which he begins: "The Herero people and we fought many battles against one another..."¹⁶

Another example of how SWAPO influences discourse about historical events is reports about the Cassinga massacre, which I briefly mentioned in the short introduction to the history of Namibia. Just after the tragedy happened both sides reported on the event in a completely different manner. South Africa, especially South African television, showed pictures from the Chetequera, camp with a significant military presence and which was located 200 km from Cassinga. They were using those pictures with artillery and armoured vehicles when they were referring to Cassinga and they claimed that both were military bases. On the other hand, SWAPO in all of its statements claimed that Cassinga was purely a refugee camp. SWAPO's version of the story was broadly accepted by the international media. As a result of those events SWAPO's international support even increased. Most scholars agreed on the fact, that there were no more than one hundred soldiers present in the camp during the attack. Because it is difficult to make clear distinctions between the refugee and the military camp, most scholars decided to use a different term for these specific types of camps: liberation movement camps. Christian A. Williams describes the most important difference between a refugee camp and liberation movement camp as:

One feature that does define liberation movement camps as a whole and distinguishes them from most refugee camps is the role of the liberation movement in governing them. Whereas refugee camps are usually administered directly by a host nation and/or transnational human agency, Southern Africa's liberation movement camps were governed directly by exiles affiliated with a liberation movement, often with little oversight from host and donors.¹⁷

¹⁶ FIRST, R. *South-West Africa*, p. 32.

¹⁷ WILLIAMS, Ch. *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa – A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps*, p. 21.

Not only was SWAPO in direct control of its camps, but also soldiers were present in every SWAPO camp all the time. Despite the fact that the number of soldiers in the camp was sometimes insignificant, Cassinga was not a refugee camp, but a liberation movement camp. Nevertheless, the attack on the camp was a huge tragedy and my intention is not to justify it.

The most notorious claims against SWAPO are probably accusations of abuse of power by high-ranking SWAPO officials. Most of these cases are directly related to the so-called “spy crisis” or “detainee crisis”. According to SWAPO’s official version, the party and its camps were infiltrated by South Africa’s agents, who were sending information about the activities of the organization abroad. Anyone suspected of espionage was imprisoned without any trial or any direct evidence. Persons criticizing SWAPO were accused of spying as well. There are countless testimonies about the process of interrogation, during which suspects were repeatedly beaten, suspended from the ceiling and sometimes even raped.¹⁸ Prisoners often had to dig holes into the ground, which were afterwards used as cells. They suffered from malnutrition and they did not have any medical treatment. Most of the camp’s inhabitants were of Ovambo origin and people from other ethnic groups were sometimes accused of spying simply on the basis of using a different language. As a result, distrust and suspicion spread throughout the camps.¹⁹ Several organizations were founded in order to address these problems, some of them by ex-detainees, others by their relatives or activists in Namibia, for example a Parents Committee, the Political Consultative Council for Ex-detainees or Breaking the Wall of Silence. SWAPO decided to deny all of these accusations and it stated that if anything happened it happened in the name of liberation. In addition to these statements, most of the time it also mentions maltreatment by South Africa of SWAPO detainees or the general public. The autobiography of a former president of the country and leader of liberation struggle Sam Nujoma *Where Others Wavered*²⁰ was published in 2011. Some might expect that it would elucidate some of the more questionable events in SWAPO’s history. Unfortunately, there are very few mentions of the most striking crises. For instance, Nujoma only briefly mentioned the so-called “spy crisis” and he

¹⁸ For instance Cecilia Nafeda claimed in 1983 that she was raped in the camp and she even gave birth to the child, which was conceived during the rape.

¹⁹ For more detailed information see WILLIAMS, Ch. *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa – A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO’s Exile Camps*; LEYS, C., SAUL, J. Liberation without Democracy? The SWAPO Crisis of 1976. In *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1994, Vol. 20, No.1.

²⁰ NUJOMA, S. *Where Others Wavered*.

claimed that the people accused of spying were simply excluded from the party. He justifies it with the argument that there were only a few hundred of them. There is no mention of Nujoma's involvement in SWANU, the party which later became the main rival of SWAPO. What is more surprising is that even after the twelve years have passed since the struggle ended, he still demonizes Boers in his book and labels them as "racist whites". Nujoma exaggerated the role of PLAN and their military activities in the war of liberation and there is no evidence at all for some of his claims. He claims that PLAN fighters were permanently present in all parts of Namibia fighting South Africa. In his book, he also states that the armed struggle was a crucial factor in gaining independence. He also justified all detentions of people in the camp by simply stating:

If we are accused of ill-treating detainees, this was very little in compared to the killing, cruel torture and brutal treatment the apartheid South African regime inflicted on our people over so many years.²¹

Nujoma does not provide readers with any insight into the reasons why he decided to act in such and such a way in such and such a situation. He does not mention how some political issues were addressed in the party and he never says whether he had any doubts about the course of the struggle. Frequently he describes the situations which he did not even witness but only heard about. His book is neither an autobiography nor an accurate historical account of events. In my opinion, it can be labelled as political propaganda, in which he blames anyone who opposed SWAPO and labels them as traitors, puppets or spies. In his book, he also states that the struggle continues, although he did not directly mention against whom. According to some public statements he made, for example, one on 6 December 1996 some might suspect that the enemies of independent Namibia might be homosexuals. In his speech, he recommended that all foreign gays and lesbians should be deported or excluded from the country. In his public statements, he also warns all inhabitants of Namibia against neo-liberal and neo-colonial influence.

Conclusion

I have given several different instances of how SWAPO or Sam Nujoma influence the interpretation of history. In some cases, for example, labelling

²¹ NUJOMA, S. *Where Others Wavered*, p. 357.

Cassinga as a refugee camp, the consequences of those practices are not very serious. However, if we examine the events of the “spy and detainee crisis” we can see that in his representation of history Sam Nujoma is using techniques of historical negationism. He deliberately trivializes and relativizes the importance of those events. What is worse he tries to shift the blame onto others when he points to the crimes committed by the apartheid regime. It looks as if the party will never confess to its share of guilt in the war crimes committed during the liberation struggle. It is obvious that the party is trying to shift all the blame onto the apartheid regime and by doing so it may, as a result, endanger all people of European origin living in the country. Because the stories of individuals who suffered at the hands of SWAPO are constantly ignored, the victims may suffer even more for instance from PTSD. Colin Leys and John Saul describe the “spy crisis” as:

...at the centre stage (of the crisis) one finds the demand springing directly from the movements rank-and-file, for the realization of more democratic procedures and for a far greater measure both of leadership accountability and of membership participation with SWAPO. It was a demand that the SWAPO leadership was, in the end, most loath to countenance, much less to meet.²²

The effort to manufacture the identity of SWAPO supporters as liberators of the country is evident if we think about the intentions of historical negationism in the Namibian context. Persons who were in the leadership of SWAPO are now depicted as national heroes and nobody can question their decisions. The title given to ex-president Sam Nujoma of “founding father”, may serve as an example.

Respondents have an ambivalent attitude towards SWAPO and their relationship with it. While some overtly express support for the party, others who were displaced try to remove SWAPO and its role in their lives from their narrative. Respondents stated: “We are SWAPO’s kids, we were raised by SWAPO.”²³ or “We are also freedom fighters, we were in camps and our role was to grow up and, if the situation required, to fight for independence. But we gained independence before we grew up.”²⁴ However, others do not express their affiliation with the party so openly because, in this sense, they feel

²² LEYS, C., SAUL, J. Liberation without Democracy? The SWAPO Crisis of 1976. In *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1994, Vol. 20, No. 1, p. 124.

²³ Response of the respondent: N. P. Walwis Bay, January 2018.

²⁴ Response of the respondent: J. D. Oshakati, May 2017.

betrayed. They had to return suddenly to Namibia in 1991 before they had finished their studies and did not have any special preparation for conditions in Namibia and the party did not provide any specific assistance after their arrival. Williams describes this phenomenon as:

Inhabitants of liberation movement camps not only fled political violence in their country of origin but also joined an organization leading a liberation war. As a result, they often intended themselves as freedom fighters irrespective of whether they had trained as guerrillas, or intended to take up arms, to liberate their nation.²⁵

In this sense, it is obvious that some of the former SWAPO exiles sometimes use the identity of former “freedom fighters” and in some cases they may intentionally exploit this identity to gain government recognition and support.

I have to admit that so far Namibian politicians have respected basic democratic principles, even if in their public speeches they say the opposite sometimes. The limits of this article did not allow me to analyze some decisions in recent Namibian history, which may be construed as very questionable, such as the third term of President Sam Nujoma, which was in contravention of the constitution or the arrest and lengthy imprisonment without trial of Caprivi separatists. The situation in the country is so far stable, though there are many serious problems such as extreme poverty, HIV, corruption, etc. It is hard to predict how the party will resolve these pressing issues and how the new generation of politicians will reproduce the myth about national liberation.

REFERENCIES

- AKAWA, Martha. *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2014.
- ASSMANN, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- DOBELL, Lauren. *SWAPO's Struggle for Namibia, 1960 – 1991: War by Other Means*. Basel: P. Schlettwein Publishing Switzerland, 1998.
- FIRST, Ruth. *South-West Africa*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963.
- HALBWACHS, Maurice. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Paris: Libraire Félix Alcan, 1925.

²⁵ WILLIAMS, Ch. *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa – A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps*, p. 21.

- KENNA, Constance. *The “GDR-Children” of Namibia: Homecomers in an Unknown Country*. Windhoek: Klaus Heg Verlag, 1999.
- KEULDER Christiaan. *State, Society and Democracy, a Reader in Namibian Politics*. Windhoek: John Meinert Printing, 2010.
- KRAUSE, Jürgen. *Das DDR-Namibia-Solidaritätsprojekt “Schule der Freundschaft”: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen interkultureller Erziehung*. Oldenburg: BIS Verlag, 2009.
- LEYS, Colin, SAUL, John S. Liberation without Democracy? The SWAPO Crisis of 1976. In *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1994, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 123–147.
- MACHALÍK, Tomáš. Czechoslovakia on the Battlefield of the Cold War, the Angolan Civil War and the “Namibian Czechs”. In *Viva Africa 2007. Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on African Studies*, pp. 205–220.
- MACHALÍK, Tomáš. SWAPO Children in Czechoslovakia from the Past to the Present. In *Viva Africa 2008. Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on African Studies*, pp. 280–293.
- MELBER, Henning. *Understanding Namibia – The Trials of Independence*. London: Horst and Company, 2014.
- NIEKREZEN, Yvonne, ARMBRUSTER, Christian, WITTE, Mattias. A Problematic Sense of Belonging, a Media Analysis of the “GDR Children of Namibia”. In *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture*, 2014, Vol. 15, pp. 95–123.
- NUJOMA, Sam. *Where Others Wavered*. London: Panaf, 2011.
- OWENS, Jason. Namibia’s “GDR Kids”: Multiple Displacement, Identity and Assimilation in a Post-Apartheid State. In *The Journal of International Children’s Literature*, 1999, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 24–29.
- OWENS, Jason. Blood Ties and Tongue Ties: The Role of Children in Shifting the Boundaries of Namibia’s German-Speaking Community. In *The Journal of History of Childhood and Youth*, 2008, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 232–249.
- ROUSSO, Henry. *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1914*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- SCHMITT, Caroline, KLEIN-ZIMMER, Kathrin, WITTE, Mattias. Growing Up Transnationally between SWAPO and GDR – a Biographical Ethnographic Study on Namibian Refugee Children. In *Transnational Social Review*, 2014, Vol. 3, pp. 28–33.
- SCHMITT, Caroline, WITTE Matthias, POLAT, Serpil. International Solidarity in the GDR and Transnationality: an Analysis of Primary School Materials from Namibian Child Refugees. In *Transnational Social Review – A Social Work Journal*, 2014, Vol. 4, Nos. 2/3, pp. 242–258.

- SCHMITT, Caroline, WITTE, Matthias. You Are Special: Othering in Biographies of GDR Children from Namibia. In *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2018, Vol. 41, No. 7, pp. 1352–1369.
- VEDDER, Heinrich. *South-West Africa in Early Times*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- WALLACE, Marion. *A History of Namibia from the Beginning to 1990*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- WILLIAMS, Christian A. *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa – A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO's Exile Camps*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.