

A Racial Division of Labor: Everyday Practices of Policing in German Southwest-Africa.

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In the early 20th century, in the German colony of Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia), a territory one and a half times the size of the German "motherland", the task of policing fell to a tiny force of six hundred men called the Landespolizei. This semi-civilian, semi-military police force was constantly understaffed and under-equipped. Its men had to police both the white settler community and the black population. Charged with representing the colonial state and with claiming the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force, the policemen struggled to assert authority in both groups. Two-thirds white Germans – recruited from low-ranking former soldiers – and one-third locally recruited black Africans – also often former soldiers –, this police force was an exception to the usual colonial policing model of predominantly non-white troops. Based on my ongoing dissertation research in the Berlin and Windhoek archives, my paper discusses violence in the everyday practices of the police. It asks how, on this ground level of state-building, different forms, mechanisms, and intensities of violence shaped communal life and constituted a colonial order. It inquires in particular into the role that black African policemen played in fashioning the colonial state. The men of the Landespolizei undertook a great variety of tasks which ranged from postal service, veterinary inspections, and land surveying, to (forced) labor recruitment, criminal investigations, and prisoner transports. Virtually all of these tasks regularly and systematically involved violence. Slaps, kicks, beatings, shackling, rape, destruction of food and possessions, and killing were all part of the policeman's normal repertoire of tools for enforcing colonial order. The breadth of responsibilities generated a complicated system of distributed labor and shared violence. The "work" of violence underwent a specialization along racial lines. Some violent tasks were performed by black, others by white policemen. Violence was "shared" both in the sense of being apportioned out to different actors and in the sense of being collectively undertaken by those actors. But this distribution was linked to notions of status and professionalism in differential ways. Both the black African and the white German policemen brought a host of ideas about policing to their job. A particular violent action might be conceived as valorizing, invigorating, or rewarding to the one, but not necessarily to the other. Yet, different understandings could be congruent within the larger cultural and ideological context. In the process of the everyday they amalgamated into an organizational culture in which European and African concepts of military and patron-client loyalty, of honor, respectability, and masculinity came together. Violence, in this culture of policing practices, was a shared endeavor which allowed participation and appropriation.