Wildenthal, Lora. Review of *Towards Redemption: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia between 1890 and 1923*, by Jan Bart Gewald. *African Studies Review* 40, no. 3 (1999): 137-139. doi: 10.2307/525242.

Jan Bart Gewald. *Towards Redemption: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia between 1890 and 1923*. Leiden: Research School CNWS, School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, 1996. x + 400 pp. Bibliography. Name index. No price reported. Paper.

Lora Wildenthal, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The 1904-7 war between the German colonial state and the Hereros and other Namibians is a central event in Namibian and German colonial history. While a number of publications exist in English about this war, surprisingly [End Page 137] little has been written to modify convincingly the classic accounts of Horst Drechsler and Helmut Bley. A great virtue of Gewald's book is his attempt to rethink the causes and course of the war from the ground up. Chapter 5 describes the war as the outcome of a series of contingent actions and systematic misunderstandings on the part of German authorities. Gewald's account of a German provocation of war is very different from the usual account of a planned and executed Herero uprising against the Germans. In making his case, he points out several inaccuracies and outright doctoring in contemporaries' and historians' use of Herero and German documents. Gewald also stresses the role of Herero political concerns and diplomatic efforts. This chapter is truly innovative and presents an argument that subsequent historians of the war must reckon with.

Nevertheless, Gewald's argument and achievement in chapter 5 are in some tension with his primary goal: to decenter the war's place and to focus instead on the reconstitutions of Herero culture and community in the face of colonial rule before and after the war. Here, too, he makes available much valuable information about Herero succession politics (his chronology begins with the death of the Okahandja leader Maharero Tjamuaha in 1890 and ensuing disputes), Samuel Mahero's alliance with the German colonial state, and the effects of rinderpest from the late 1890s. Chapters on the years after the war treat the strength of Christianity in the prisoner of war camps, militarization of German army officers' servants, and the evasion of German control in the colony's northwest region and across the border in South Africa and present-day Botswana. The final chapter discusses the Herero experience of the South African victory and administration from the First World War until 1923, with a focus on their gradual realization that South African administration would not provide a "new age," as Gewald puts it (288), for them.

He concludes with the funeral of Samuel Maharero as an event representing and enacting a renewed and consolidated Herero identity.

This ambitious survey and reinterpretation could have benefited from a theoretical discussion of the concept of ethnicity itself. After chapter 1, the Herero assume the appearance of a fixed, bounded group who interact with and express opinions about Germans, but rarely do so with other Africans. Tantalizing hints are dangled about the appeal of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association and Hereros' assertion that only "white" and "black" identities were salient in post-World War I politics, displacing identities of "Germans, Englishmen or Boers" (328). Gewald tells us that his book "is, unashamedly, a history of the male elite" (35 7). But shame or lack of it is not a useful way of deciding the relevance of gender analysis to the story, and in any case, Gewald is here undermining his own discussions of issues such as prostitution and sexual abuse of Herero women.

The greatest weakness of the book is its lack of adequate editing. The numerous errors reflect not only a struggle with a non-native language (with invented words such as *exemplific* and *feelingless*), but also inadequate time spent on revision. Within the same passage, paragraph, or even sentence, **[End Page 138]** spelling and capitalization of names and words vary (e.g., 285 n. 144). There are several basic translation mistakes (e.g., "Nathaniel has become the offer [sacrifice, victim?] of his peace mission" [267]). Since Gewald's book depends on a close reading of archival documents in several languages, precision is important. Gewald's research deserves better. Those interested in Namibian history should definitely read his book, but they must have patience with its flaws.