



## CURT VON FRANÇOIS STATUE

### Windhoek, Namibia

-22.571000, 17.085306



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### Executive Summary

Curt von François (1852-1931) was a German military officer and colonialist, most well known in Namibia for his role in the genocide of the Namaqua and Herero peoples. A statue of him was erected in 1965 in Windhoek, Namibia, to mark the 75th anniversary of his supposed 'founding' of the capital city. The monument has been the centre of contestation over Namibia's 'whitewashed' history for some time, though calls for its removal re-ignited in intensity following the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests that garnered the attention of international bodies and traditional Namibian leaders. Eventually, the statue was removed in November 2022. This case study illustrates how different stakeholders in Namibia conceptualise the decolonisation of public spaces.

## Introduction

The controversy over a statue of Curt von François in Windhoek has its roots in German colonialism in Africa. Von François (1852-1931) was a German military officer and colonialist who contributed substantially to expand the German empire in Africa.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, he played a leading role in massacres perpetrated in 1904-1908 by the German colonial forces against the Herero and Namaqua (also known as Nama) tribes in present-day Namibia. The history of these massive killings and human rights violations remained largely under-reported during most of the 20th century. Indeed, von François was acclaimed for founding Windhoek, the largest city and capital of Namibia, and in 1965, his statue was erected on the 75th anniversary of the city's founding. Only in more recent times has there been a call for the removal of the statue and a demand on the part of Namibia for Germany to come to terms with its colonial-era history.

## Background

Curt von François served as *Landeshauptmann* ('governor') upon the German South-West Africa (modern-day Namibia) designation as a German settler colony.<sup>2</sup> As a geographer, he detailed his observations on geographical and astronomical phenomena throughout Namibia. Von François appears to have fulfilled the role of the colonial 'explorer' par excellence, seeking new lands for economic extraction and expanding and centralising German occupation of Southwest Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to his involvement in German Southwest Africa, von François had served as a paid mercenary to the brutal rule of Leopold II in Belgian Congo. He is described as a 'fanatical racist' who wrote of the need to treat local people with 'relentless severity'<sup>4</sup> and advocated fiercely for a military solution to the *Eingeborenenfrage* ('native question'). During initial struggles with the local Witbooi Namaqua, the largest ethnic group of the Khoekhoe community indigenous to South West Africa, von François' orders were 'to destroy the tribe of the Witbooi.' Attacking at night, von François led German troops to massacre almost one hundred Namaqua women and children in their sleep.<sup>5</sup> German settlement of the area moved rapidly. As a result, the Namaqua and Herero, another major ethnic group of the area, lost their cultural, religious, and political ways of life. They chose to rise in protest against German occupation, despite having previously sought peaceful options.<sup>6</sup> In response, the Imperial government instigated the infamous 1904 '*Vernichtungsbefehl*'

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<sup>1</sup> S2A3 Biographical Database of Southern African Science, "François, Curt Carl Bruno von," *S2A3 Biographical Database of Southern African Science*, updated April 24, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Blackler, "From Boondoggle to Settlement Colony," *Central European History*, 50:4, 2017 pp. 449-470.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 460.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 462.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 465.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 470.

('extermination order'). This marked the start of the 'first genocide of the twentieth century.'<sup>7</sup>

The statue, made by sculptor Hennie Potgieter, was unveiled on October 18, 1965, during the celebrations of the 75 anniversary of Windhoek. An obelisk was unveiled on the same day in 1980 to include the inscriptions: 'Curt von Francois ended in 1890 the first Compass Route survey on 18 October,' in English, Afrikaans and German.<sup>8</sup>

## History of the Contestation

In 2015, the political party SWANU President Usutuaije Maamberua called for the statue of von François to be removed, calling it an 'abomination' in the country's Parliament. However, the statue remained, despite many roads around it being renamed to commemorate Namibian and African heroes.<sup>9</sup> In June 2020, a petition was launched for the statue's removal, titled 'a Curt farewell' stating that:



**Figure 1:** Statue of Curt von François. Image by Pemba.mpimaji via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0

Continuing to keep Curt von François on his pedestal... is a painful erasure of the city's history and that of its rightful founder, Jonker Afrikaner. This colonial monument continues to feed the incorrect narrative that 'this land was empty' until he 'discovered' it.<sup>10</sup>

The petition asks for the statue's immediate removal and to be replaced by one of Jonker Afrikaner - an Oorlam Chief who settled in Windhoek before German colonial occupation.<sup>11</sup> The petition states, 'we owe it to ... the thousands of Nama and Herero people who were subjected to genocide by the murderous German Colonial Regime.'<sup>12</sup> In a video uploaded on June 23, 2020, a protest in Windhoek can be seen. Protestors carried placards saying, 'a daily reminder of white supremacy. An insult to those 'whose blood waters our freedom' and 'this man killed black women and children.'<sup>13</sup> Attendants of the protest told news reporters:

<sup>7</sup> Vilho Shigwedha, "The return of Herero and Nama bones from Germany: the victims' struggle for recognition and recurring genocide memories in Namibia," in Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Elisabeth Anstett, "Human Remains in Society: curation and exhibition in the aftermath of genocide and mass violence," Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Discover Namibia, "Statue of Curt von Francois."

<sup>9</sup> IPPR, "Curt von François - Time to Go," *IPPR*, July 16, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Hildegard Titus, "A Curt Farewell," *Change.org*, July 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, "History of Namibia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, no date.

<sup>12</sup> Hildegard Titus, "A Curt Farewell," *Change.org*, July 2020.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

I can't imagine that this is what you would want to teach your children about history... about our history. Black Lives Matter. He [van François] didn't think that our lives matter. So he must go.<sup>14</sup>

The history of Namibia has been very clear. It has been filled with the blood of racism, of apartheid ... this [the statue] is a symbol of that bloody past.<sup>15</sup>

On June 20, 2020, a joint press statement by the Nama Traditional Leaders Association and the Herero Traditional Authority in Namibia called for the von François statue to fall. The statement was titled 'all colonial symbols in Namibia must fall,' citing the resurgence of calls for justice in the UK, the US and around the world.<sup>16</sup> It states:

We are in full support of the move to remove the statue of genocider and racist Kurt von François... [we must] remove this statue that represents a horrendous history... this statue must go, because of what he did to the Witbooi folks - men, women and children, the looting and burning down of their homes. Namibia as a whole should not glorify, monumentalize and immortalize him and his likes, period.<sup>17</sup>

The statue of von François is also caught up in a perceived negligence of traditional leadership or representation of Indigenous peoples in Namibian politics. It is also part of the plight of the Herero and Nama people in gaining recognition and reparation from the German government for the genocide committed against them. 'We are talking, together with Ovaherero leaders... to the National Heritage Council, academics and historians to resolve and instil mutual respect for cultural heritage,' said Petrus Kooper, the Nama Traditional Leaders Forum chair, in Summer 2020.<sup>18</sup> After the genocide, the statue to von François 'cannot be a positive rehabilitation factor for both victims and their descendants.'<sup>19</sup>

Many in Namibia have used the contestation as an opportunity for education. In October 2020, there was a screening of the BBC documentary 'Namibia: Genocide and the Second Reich' in the fort von François himself designed.<sup>20</sup> The founder of the 'Curt farewell' petition, Hildegard Titus, spoke of the importance of having 'history contextualised.' One attendee, activist Keith Vries, said:

Symbols are a continuation of the physical violence that takes place in our lived experience... the way Christians have a cross that represents their devotion is the same way white people have the Nazi flag and signs that speak to and maintain white supremacy in a space.. [it is always] in the back rooms of your consciousness, you always know when you step foot in town that your boss is Curt von François that is standing here, and no one else.

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<sup>14</sup> One Africa TV, "Youth Protest removal of German colonial statue," *YouTube*, June 17, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Festus Muundjua and Sima Luipert-Goeieman, "All Colonial Symbols in Namibia Must Fall," *Genocide-Namibia.net*, June 20, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Luqman Cloete, "Govt does not contribute to Nama chief's funerals - Chief Kooper," *The Namibian*, June 3, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Martha Mukaiwa, "Curt protest continues to educate," *The Namibian*, October 22, 2020

The call for the statue's removal is not without controversy. In a letter to the Namibian newspaper 'New Era,' an anonymous writer stated that the statue 'is part of our history and we should desist from the idea that every bad thing needs to be erased or removed from our heritage... to be oblivious to history means humanity can fall into the trap of repeating the same atrocities.'<sup>21</sup> Ruprecht von François, a descendant of François, echoed the anonymous letter, arguing in an interview with *The Namibian* that removing the statue would distort historical events and be an act of discrimination against the Damara people, to whom von François' wife belonged.<sup>22</sup> On 11 February 2021, the Affirmative Repositioning (AR) movement renewed its call to remove the statue. AR spokesperson Simon Amunime argued that 'we have heroes and heroines who have done a lot in contributing to the upliftment and the building of the capital city. We cannot have someone guilty of atrocities against Namibia.'<sup>23</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

Harold Akwenya, the City of Windhoek Manager for Corporate Communications, said in June 2020:

It shouldn't be only about the statue but also about the Black Lives Matter movement... I wouldn't mind it coming this side [to Namibia] also... but it's not only about racism but also tribalism... so it's a good thing, let's carry on with the youth, we are here to change our city itself.<sup>24</sup>

In June 2022, actions taken by the City of Windhoek Council reflect Akwenya's words: the Council held a workshop to discuss the heritage management of Windhoek. They decided they would work on an encompassing policy on how to 'decolonise' the city's monuments.<sup>25</sup> The first concrete outcome of this resolution came on 27 October 2022, when the Council voted 9:5 to remove the Curt von François statue. In a tweet, the 'A Curt Farewell'-campaign shared the news with its followers, jubilantly exclaiming, 'We did it!'<sup>26</sup> Former Windhoek mayor Job Amupanda admitted that the decision was a 'back and forth for too long, but we managed.'<sup>27</sup> The Forum of German-speaking Namibians also respects the decision to take down the von François-statue, and its spokesperson emphasised their role in encouraging and promoting 'reconciliation amongst all its inhabitants in the spirit of one Namibia one nation.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> New Era, "Letters - The facts matter," *New Era*, August 7, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Eliaser Ndeyanale, "Von François' family fears removal of statue," *Namibian*, September 24, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Puyeipawa Nakashole, "AR renews call for removal of Von François statue," *Namibian*, February 12, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> One Africa TV, "Youth Protest removal of German colonial statue," *YouTube*, June 17, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> A Curt Farewell [@CurtFarewell], "The statue is going to be removed!" *Twitter*. November 2, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Lenin Ndebele, "Namibia's removal of statue of German coloniser was 'a mistake,' says great-grandson." *News24*, November 25, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Mumbuu, "Von François statue to fall." *New Era Live*, 31 October, 2022.

The statue was removed from its pedestal on 23 November 2022, accompanied by a group of cheering spectators.<sup>29</sup> However, not everybody was happy to see von François 'fall': Ruprecht von François stated the removal was 'a mistake by the City of Windhoek' and claimed his great-grandfather was 'the softest man,' thus standing by the arguments he gave two years ago.<sup>30</sup> However, other descendants of von François, such as Sharon Nangombe, saw the statue's removal as favourable to the country but lamented that the descendants had not been involved in the decision-making process.<sup>31</sup> This sentiment is echoed by a Namibian public social commentator, Lee Garises. She believes there was no broad consultation with the public about the fate of the statue - especially deliberation with von François' living descendants would have been fruitful, as narratives of his character are contested even among themselves. Garises would have liked to see the statue standing in the public sphere, not to honour the coloniser himself, but to memorialise the difficult path Namibians had to take to arrive at where they are now.<sup>32</sup>

According to Akwenya, the statue would be moved to the nearby Independence Museum, where it would be kept for safekeeping.<sup>33</sup> It will be 're-erected' once a new location has been agreed upon, whether in the museum itself or another (public) space, as was the fate of the *Reiterdenkmal* (Equestrian Monument).<sup>34</sup> While it is not clear whether a new statue will take von François' place on the pedestal, there have been proposals made by, for example, Titus' petition and the Landless People's Movement lawmaker Utaara Mootu: generally, the wish goes out to a national hero to the Namibian peoples.<sup>35</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

Since 2015, many grassroots and high political stakeholders have called for removing the Curt von François statue. A smaller number of actors were opposed to its removal. Ultimately, the City of Windhoek Council vowed to create a policy to decolonise the cultural heritage in the city. This is important, as other symbols in the country are reminders of German colonial rule. The issue of von François is another case of the larger movement against colonial relics and icons of white supremacy, grounded in the broader Black Lives Matter movement. Removing the Curt von François Statue on 23 November 2022 was the first step in this process. Until the Windhoek Council set up a coherent policy on dealing with colonial cultural inheritance in the public sphere,

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<sup>29</sup> Informanté, "Removal of the Curt von Francois statue," YouTube, November 23, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Lenin Ndebele, "Namibia's removal of statue of German coloniser was 'a mistake,' says great-grandson." *News24*, November 25, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Vitalio Angula, "Namibia Removes Statue of German Colonial 'Founder' of Windhoek." *VOA*, November 24, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Mumbuu, "Von François statue to fall." *New Era Live*, 31 October, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Deutsche Welle, "Namibia: Statue of German colonial ruler removed." *Deutsche Welle*, November 23, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Farouk Chotia, "Namibia pulls down German colonial officer's statue in Windhoek." *BBC News*, November 23, 2022; Edward Mumbuu, "Von François statue to fall." *New Era Live*, 31 October, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Mumbuu, "Von François statue to fall." *New Era Live*, 31 October, 2022.

there is still uncertainty about what precisely will be done with the von François statue.

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## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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