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The re-siting of the Rider Monument in central Windhoek from the site of one of the concentration camps from the first genocide of the 20th century to a new location in front of the museum at the Alte Feste has raised many questions. So too, has the construction of the Independence Memorial Museum on the very site formally occupied by the Rider Monument. Andrew Byerley looks into Namibia's symbolic and heritage space.



MONUMENTAL POLITICS IN NAMIBIA



OLD MONUMENTS ERECTED in honour of the fallen usually occupy the liminal zone of the there but almost not there. They are taken-for-granted elements of cityscapes that, at most, attract the sceptic gaze of the tourist. Occasionally, however, on a major anniversary or as a result of some convoluted process of representational reinvestment or de-investment, monuments may briefly reanimate public imagination.

Some monuments are, in a manner of speaking, akin to teeth in need of root-canal treatment. Extracting them, even the thought of their being tweaked to left or right, can unleash anxiety, a wagging of (political) tongues or even a flailing of fists (cf. the relocation of the “Bronze Soldier of Tallin” in 2007).

The Reiterdenkmal (Rider Monument) high on Robert Mugabe Avenue in central Windhoek is a case in point. Inaugurated in 1912 by Dr Theodore Seitz, then governor of German South-West Africa, it celebrated the so-called victory of the Schutztruppen (“The Protection Army”) over the indigenous Ovaherero and Nama. Today, however, and as William Kentridge’s installation *The Black Box/Chambre Noir* has so hauntingly intimated, this victory is widely viewed as the first genocide of the long 20th century. Indeed, the very “roots” of this monument bury themselves into the site of one of the many concentration camps where thousands of Ovaherero and Nama were wilfully wasted to death in the aftermath of military hostilities.

Sparking intensive political and media debate, in August 2009 the Rider Monument was wrapped

in bubble wrap and hoisted away into storage. In 2010, it was re-sited some 50 metres away in front of the museum at the Alte Feste – a fort built by the Schutztruppen in 1889–90 “as a stronghold to preserve peace and order between the rivaling Namas and Hereros” [sic] (onsite plaque inscription).

Seen in isolation, the removal of the Reiterdenkmal may have heartened those who have called for a “decolonization of the mind” in today’s Namibia. Indeed, as J. Zeller argued in an article in *The Namibian* in 2008, the new site in front of the museum at the Alte Feste seems optimal as “a place and space for critical memory politic”. However, seen in the context of the construction of the mammoth Independence Memorial Museum on the very site formally occupied by the Reiterdenkmal, the move has been alternatively interpreted as a further episode in the unilateral recolonization of Namibia’s symbolic and heritage space by Swapo, the political party and former liberation movement.

THE JURY IS STILL OUT, but added to other (in)famous examples (including Heroes Acre, the military museum at Okahandja, the new State House) – all constructed by North Korean companies – the Reiterdenkmal/Independence Memorial Museum episode has caused some to talk of Swapo’s Pyongyang-ization of space, while others have expressed concern over an increasing undercurrent of potentially exclusionary politics in the production of monumental space in Namibia today. ■



Inauguration of Reiterdenkmal Monument, 1912.

SOURCE: NAMIBIA NATIONAL ARCHIVES, WINDHOEK