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## **Book review of Interpreting in Namibia: Past and Present. Overview from Colonial Times to the Present Day**

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## Book review of *Interpreting in Namibia: Past and Present. Overview from Colonial Times to the Present Day*

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### Abstract

This is a review of *Interpreting in Namibia: Past and Present. Overview from Colonial Times to the Present Day*, by Jelizaveta Getta (Prague, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, 2019).

### Keywords

Book review, history of interpreting, Africa, Namibia, German South West Africa, colonialism

**Jelizaveta Getta. *Interpreting in Namibia: Past and Present. Overview from Colonial Times to the Present Day*. (Prague, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, 2019). ISBN: 978-80-7308-920-7**

In adding to the academic literature on historical aspects of interpreting, Jelizaveta Getta's book *Interpreting in Namibia: Past and Present. Overview from Colonial Times to the Present Day* provides a succinct analysis of the role of interpreting there over the past century-and-a-half. At 79 pages, this is a concise volume (available in eBook format) which is an abridged English translation of a longer Czech original (Getta, 2019b): both works are published by the publishing house of the Faculty of Arts of the prestigious Charles University in Prague. Based on considerable archival work in Namibia's capital city of Windhoek as well as in Berlin, the study primarily focuses on the period under German colonial rule (from the mid-1880s until World War One), supplemented by a brief summary of the situation under South African rule (until 1990) and subsequently as an independent nation.

The book is structured into twelve short chapters, each highlighting a specific aspect. Chapter 1 defines the historical context, briefly outlining the development of German colonisation there and the

creation of German South West Africa, as well as its occupation by and transfer to the then British dominion of South Africa during and after the First World War. Particular attention is put on the changing language policy relating to the languages of administration: German was originally the colony's official language, before Afrikaans and English assumed this status until Namibia's independence, when English became the sole official language. Chapter 2 examines how interpreting was perceived by clients during the German colonial era, highlighting the frequent dissatisfaction expressed by the imperial authorities in Berlin with the fidelity and quality of the services provided. In addition to referring to a bonus scheme designed to incentivise the learning of relevant African languages (such as Herero and Nama) by colonial administrators, Getta also refers to an 1894 meeting where the minister for the colonies intimated that officials "should be able to oversee their interpreters' work to make sure they were not being cheated" (p. 12).

The third chapter centres on the three main areas where interpreting was required by the German colonial authorities: court interpreting, religious interpreting, and diplomatic interpreting. Here, Getta profiles each area in turn, first outlining the need for interpreters to communicate between German and the local languages in judicial contexts. She presents information regarding the rudimentary training, testing, remuneration, and employment conditions for those court interpreters, as well as details regarding the quality. Interestingly from a modern perspective, the majority of the interpreters were actually "policemen, who provided the service in addition to their main job" (p. 16). In terms of the religious context, this subsection centres on the activities of Christian missionaries in the colony, profiling the interpreter Willem Cloete, who was of mixed heritage and was even the subject of a dedicated biography written by a contemporary (Olpp, 1913). The subsection on diplomatic interpreting briefly presents biographical information on two German interpreters (Ludwig Kleinschmidt and August Wulfhorst) who understood local languages and assisted at meetings between German officials and local chiefs (pp. 27-32). The analysis of these three areas is supplemented in Chapter 4, which gives a brief outline of the contractual rights and obligations of interpreters during that period of time.

Chapter 5 moves on to discussion of how interpreters were trained in the colonial era, focusing firstly on the then newly-founded Seminar für Orientalische Sprachen (Seminar for Oriental Languages) at the imperial Frederick William University in Berlin (as an aside, as noted in Erard (2012, p. 149), this was also an alma mater of the noted polyglot Emil Krebs). Getta details that provision for Herero and Nama, two of the local languages relevant to colonial German South West Africa, was made from 1894 onwards. Based on the examination of administrative and course documents from that time, she notes that some tuition appeared to have been given by native speakers of these languages (p. 37). The second subsection of the chapter focuses on the promotion of German in the colony's school system, which was based on a network of missionary

schools.

Chapter 6 gives a brief synopsis of other interpreters who worked in the colony, and Chapter 7 provides a short overview of written translation in German South West Africa, including the translation of the Bible into Herero. The eighth chapter centres on written materials used by translators and interpreters in their everyday work at that time, including grammars and dictionaries. Chapter 9 offers some remarks about German interpreters working in other colonies at the time.

The final three chapters are devoted to the era after World War One. Chapter 10 profiles the role of interpreters during South African rule, including the compilation of a directory of interpreters, as well as information regarding their working conditions, professional status, and testing procedures. The final subsection of this chapter (pp. 62-63) profiles the role of interpreting during the various sessions of the Turnhalle Constitutional Conference in the mid-1970s, which aimed to develop a constitution for Namibia. Afrikaans was the main language, but at times interpretation was also provided in a range of other languages too. Chapter 11 highlights the role of interpreting in modern-day Namibia, including a presentation of the Translation Studies programme at the University of Namibia, as well as the need for interpreting services among international organisations represented in the country such as the various UN agencies, the EU Delegation, and the German Embassy. The closing chapter offers Getta's thoughts on the future of interpreting in the country, including pertinent suggestions for improved professionalisation.

As the book's subtitle 'overview' implies, its brevity means that in several instances the information is only presented rather than examined in greater depth. However, with the work's bibliography containing items in four languages (Czech, English, German, and Russian), the reader is directed to additional resources for further consultation. The reviewed volume is particularly valuable for its findings based on archival research, such as in Chapters 2-5. In addition, it is to be praised for featuring the biographical portraits of several interpreters, which provide further details regarding the colonial context of German South West Africa. With two of the contributions to the recent edited volume *Towards an Atlas of the History of Interpreting* (Ruiz Rosendo & Baigorri-Jalón, 2023) dedicated to African case studies (Mbayo, 2023; Sarmiento Pérez, 2023), there is certainly ongoing interest in the history of interpreting and interpreters in colonial times, both in Africa and also elsewhere (e.g., see Yannakakis, 2021; Hoyte-West, 2023; Kolb & Pöllabauer, 2023, etc.). Indeed, it is clear that *Interpreting in Namibia: Past and Present. Overview from Colonial Times to the Present Day* is a useful contribution to this absorbing and understudied research area.

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