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Namibia Is Liberated from South African Control

The liberation of Namibia from South African control culminated in its independence on March 21, 1990, marking a significant milestone in the country's history. Initially under German colonial rule from 1884 until World War I, Namibia, then known as South West Africa, fell under South African administration after the war. Over the subsequent decades, South Africa enforced oppressive policies, including apartheid, which severely restricted the rights of the Namibian black majority. Resistance movements, notably the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), mobilized both internally and from exile to fight for independence, often facing brutal repression from South African forces.

A pivotal moment occurred on December 22, 1988, when an agreement involving Angola, Cuba, and South Africa was signed, paving the way for Namibian self-determination. The United Nations played a crucial role in overseeing subsequent elections, which led to the establishment of a democratic constitution. The new constitution enshrined human rights and aimed to rectify historical injustices, although challenges remained regarding ethnic tensions and political representation. Despite these issues, Namibia's transition from colonial rule to a democratic government has been largely viewed as a success story, demonstrating the complexities of post-colonial governance and the ongoing struggle for inclusivity and equality among its diverse populations.

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Subject Terms



Date December 22, 1988

When the Namibian people secured a plan for independence from South Africa, they ended more than one hundred years of colonial domination and paved the way for black majority rule.

Locale New York, New York

Key Figures

- Sam Nujoma (b. 1929), president of the South-West Africa People's Organization
- José Eduardo dos Santos (b. 1942), president of Angola since 1979
- Fidel Castro (b. 1926 or 1927), prime minister of Cuba, 1959-1976, and president of the Cuban Council of State, 1976-2006

- F. W. de Klerk (b. 1936), president of South Africa, 1989-1994
- Chester Crocker (b. 1941), U.S. undersecretary of state for African affairs

Summary of Event

On December 22, 1988, representatives of Angola, Cuba, and South Africa met at the United Nations headquarters in New York City for a ceremony celebrating the signing of a complex regional agreement that included a Namibian independence plan. Chester Crocker, U.S. undersecretary of state for African affairs, played an important mediating role in this historic compromise, although many observers were critical of the terms Crocker had negotiated.

Germany had ruled the area now known as Namibia (then called South West Africa) from 1884 to 1914. South Africa captured the territory from Germany and dominated it for seventy-three years, beginning in 1915 (officially since 1921). During that time, the political and economic rights of the Namibian people, the black majority, were denied.

Prior to European conquest of this southwest African territory, various ethnic groups, mainly the Ovambo, the Nama, the Herero, the Damara, the San, the Kavango, and the Tswana, lived in the area. The Germans, who claimed most of Namibia except for Walvis Bay, Namibia's only deep seaport, had to fight and kill large numbers of Nama and Herero in order to establish their claim in 1884. In 1915, during **World War I (/research-starters/diplomacy-and-international-relations/world-war-i)**, South Africa invaded the area and took it from the Germans. In the years that followed, South Africa, too, had to use force to stop the rebellions of African Namibians who resisted South African claims to rule the country.

For a short time, the international community recognized the right of South Africa to govern South West Africa. Like other countries with mandates to govern under the jurisdiction of the **League of Nations**, however, South Africa was instructed to convert its governance of the mandate territory to a United Nations trust territory governed in preparation for independence. South Africa refused to govern the country as a trust and began to consolidate its control of all territory affairs.

Most African trust territories assumed statehood in the early 1960's. The territory's African allies argued that South Africa's introduction of apartheid into Namibia was a violation of the principles of the U.N. Charter. The South Africans not only introduced racially discriminatory labor and living laws but also imposed a law that created a so-called homeland for each **ethnic group (/research-starters/ethnic-and-cultural-studies/ethnicity)** and attempted to prevent all Africans in the territory from uniting as a single group. On October 27, 1966, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution that revoked South Africa's mandate because of maladministration.

In 1967, the United Nations appointed an eleven-person Council for South West Africa to administer the territory, which it renamed Namibia. On June 21, 1971, the International Court of Justice declared South Africa an illegal presence in Namibia and ruled that South Africa should withdraw from Namibia immediately. The court's finding contributed to a new round of Namibian resistance against South Africa. Church organizations circulated petitions, workers embarked on a general strike, and the South African government responded by detaining and torturing hundreds. The full number of those executed is unknown. The South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), whose members fought internally and in exile to liberate their country, helped to organize the 1971 resistance.

In 1957, a group of migrant workers had formed the Ovamboland People's Congress (OPC) to address workers' issues such as discrimination in salaries, hiring, promotion, and working conditions. The Ovambo are the largest ethnic group in Namibia. (Exact population numbers of any Namibian group are unknown, because prior to independence there was no national census.) In 1960, the OPC was renamed the South-West Africa People's Organization. SWAPO was constituted to fight South African racist policies and external control of Namibia, although it continued to fight for workers' rights. Peaceful protests against South Africa often ended in deaths and injuries. By 1963, SWAPO leaders, living in exile, were committed to armed struggle to free their country. Sam Nujoma, who headed the organization, traveled the globe to obtain support for the freedom struggle in Namibia. SWAPO became Namibia's internationally recognized government in exile.

South Africa's efforts to counter indigenous support for SWAPO throughout the years of illegal occupation of Namibia prompted a multitude of reports of **human rights (/research-starters/law/human-rights)** violations. The reported violations included torture, assassinations, mass murder, imprisonment in cramped and squalid conditions, administration of depressant drugs and electric shocks, intimidation, harassment, denial of civil liberties, and economic disruptions. South Africa even used fighter bombers against the Nama to enforce subjugation. The governing Namibian authorities also attempted coercion through the education system. The school curriculum for those few black children allowed access to an (inadequate) education was a vehicle for discrediting SWAPO and building support for South African colonialism.

One of the most feared tools of the South African government was the paramilitary Koevoet (sometimes referred to as Takki Squads or Etango). Koevoet was renowned for its unrestrained use of terror against any village or individual it targeted. Beatings, torture, robbery, rape, and murder were part of its daily activities. This three-thousand-member unit, trained in brutality, for years inflicted arbitrary terror on the Namibian population. Koevoet demanded a role in the election process and postindependence police force before it would honor the regional settlement negotiated on December 22, 1988.

Neither the South African government nor the U.S. government acted forcefully to eliminate Koevoet's role in the 1988 independence process. Indeed, SWAPO itself was not democratically organized, and the movement was known to have used inhumane and brutal measures against its own dissident voices, including detention, imprisonment in underground dungeons, torture, starvation, and summary execution. Negotiators were thus evenhanded in their dealings with the less-than-savory behavior of both SWAPO and its opponents.

Namibia's economic rights were also violated during its long colonial history. Despite proclamations by the international community that all transnational corporate operations in Namibia were illegal, some transnational corporations (TNCs) continued to extract the mineral wealth of Namibia. Moreover, under South African jurisdiction, TNCs were never forced to establish or maintain codes of conduct for their black workers. In addition to exporting Namibia's physical resource base, TNCs did little to develop Namibia's human resource base.

The regional package signed in December, 1988, linked Namibia's fate to the actions of others in neighboring states. According to the package, if the Angolans agreed to various conditions (such as requesting Cuban troops to leave Angola), then the Namibians could have independent elections. This infuriated many Namibians, but the independence of Namibia hinged on such compromises. The withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola enabled Namibia's self-determination and the initiation of peace talks to stabilize neighboring Angola. The United Nations oversaw the election process leading to independence for Namibia, which was achieved on March 21, 1990.

Significance

Independent Namibians designed one of the most democratic constitutions in the world. Following the elections provided for in the negotiated independence agreement, the victorious representatives from the competing political parties formed a constitutional convention and quickly wrote a new constitution. Although SWAPO won these elections, it did so with only 57 percent of the vote, obliging the organization to work with other parties, including the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), which included many who had collaborated under South African rule. The DTA won more than 28 percent of the vote, and other smaller parties also participated.

Observers of the constitutional process were impressed with the ability of such different political constituencies to work together to forge a truly consensual constitutional document, which established a secular, democratic, and unitary state. The constituent assembly elected Nujoma the country's first president. He was elected popularly for two subsequent terms, ruling as president until replaced by his handpicked successor, Hifikepunye Pohamba, who was elected president in 2004. Nujoma used his time in office to consolidate powers into the executive branch, and successive **National Assembly (/research-starters/politics-and-government/national-assembly)** elections saw voter turnouts decrease even as SWAPO gained seats at the expense of the DTA and other smaller parties, suggesting some disillusionment of voters about the gradual concentration of power.

The Namibian constitution guaranteed the human and political rights of all Namibians "regardless of race, colour, ethnic origin, sex, religion, creed or social or economic status." Apartheid laws and any other practices of racial discrimination were made illegal. The Namibian constitution also offered women the opportunity, rare in Africa, to use their national constitution to claim equal rights with men. Police squads were eliminated, and external donors helped to train a professional civilian police force and military. Namibia's new legal system guaranteed due process and a speedy trial. Competing newspapers published daily and were free to criticize the government. Affirmative action programs for black Africans and women were implemented to bring qualified individuals into the government and the private sector and to give them access to education. English was declared the official language of Namibia; Afrikaans, the colonial language of South Africa, became available in the schools only as an elective.

Unlike South Africa, Namibia established no truth and reconciliation commission, preferring simply to forget the evils of the past. Indeed, with plenty of human rights abuses attributable to both white groups and SWAPO, this may have been a wise decision. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Namibia still had a race problem and an ethnic problem. Whites had been gradually excluded from ministerial positions, and the long-term status of native whites seemed potentially precarious based on increasing incidents of antiwhite comments by SWAPO leaders. The fact that whites still owned the vast majority of the wealth in Namibia fostered resentment.

The majority Ovambo people have served as the primary electoral support for SWAPO, and the tendency for ethnic-based voting in Namibia predicts ongoing SWAPO domination of Namibia's political life. Black Africans of Nama-Damara descent and Herero speakers have continued to complain about past atrocities at the hands of SWAPO, and their support for minority parties has prevented their active involvement in the government of the country. Still, Namibia represents a success story of transition from white racist minority rule to black democratic majority rule, with considerable stability having been achieved in the country's first two decades of existence. Whether this stability persists depends on the ability of the country to fashion a truly diverse and participatory political culture.

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