

August Bebel Accuses the Colonialist Carl Peters of Two Murders (1896)

Abstract

During what was expected to be a routine parliamentary debate on March 13, 1896, the Social Democratic leader August Bebel (1840–1913) stood up and astounded the house with his charge of murder against Carl Peters (1856–1918), the colonial ruler and administrator in German East Africa. Bebel began with a general account of German colonial policy as having been “written with blood and tears.” Bebel then charged that Peters had wed a local girl named Jagodjo according to African tradition but, in late 1891, had had her hanged for infidelity, along with one of Peters’ male servants named Mabruk who had broken into the house where Peters’ black concubines lodged and had sex with the girl. Thus, one of Germany’s greatest colonial scandals erupted. From Bebel’s evidence, it appeared even to staunch supporters of colonialism that Peters had acted out of pure jealousy; parliamentarians and the public were even more outraged that Peters appeared to have adopted African customs and was little more than a “savage” himself.

Source

[...] Gentlemen, another person who has played, and to a certain extent still does play, a much greater, more influential role in our colonial policy is Dr. Peters, known to you all. Dr. Peters was appointed to head the provincial government of Tanganyika. He, as far as I know, refused to accept this position; that sufficed for him to be granted a temporary allowance.^[1] He is still in Germany today, presumably here in Berlin, and draws a pension of over 6,000 marks, which he can consume at leisure, and uses his ample free time, as you know, to involve himself with all his might in the campaign to enlarge our fleets.

[...]

His role in these recent matters led me to acquaint myself somewhat more closely with this man’s past, and I must say that, given what I learned—in part from his own writings and in part from others’ reports that I find entirely credible—I was utterly astonished that the Reich government, which must be aware of the events I wish to outline here, nevertheless, and in spite of these things, intended to invest Dr. Peters with a position of great trust like that of head of the provincial government of Tanganyika. In light of the things that I have learned about Peters in the interim, however, I am of the opinion that it is quite fortunate that Dr. Peters did not accept the position in Tanganyika, for his actions there would certainly have been similar to those he took in other places in Africa while stationed there. His administration there would have been disastrous and damaging in every respect.

Gentlemen, the most important thing is that we use Dr. Peter’s own accounts as recorded in a thick book entitled *The German Emin Pasha Expedition of Dr. Carl Peters*, published in Munich and Leipzig in 1891, to shed some light on his person.^[2] He intended this book for the public; one can thus assume that he portrayed the events which occurred in such a light so as to be as inoffensive as possible. And nevertheless, I must say that that for which Dr. Peters takes responsibility in his book is of such a nature that a man who is capable of such things is not in my opinion fit—nor ever should be allowed—to serve as civil servant of the German Reich in a German colony. (“Very right!” from the Social Democrats.) Gentlemen, the discussion of the expedition’s beginning commences on page 55 of this book. He explains how he hired a number of Somalis in Zanzibar for his expedition to search for Emin Pasha; he then says that he immediately introduced the use of corporal punishment, and that he was rigorous in

enforcing this.[3] Now, one must know Dr. Peters to know exactly what he means when he states that he was “rigorous” in his enforcement of the corporal punishment he had ordered. (“Very right!” [from the left.]

[...]

Dr. Peters had, as mentioned, taken a number of Somalis as porters and soldiers on his expedition. Some of these people, as should be expected considering the strenuous march and the heavy loads they were carrying, sooner or later became weary of this service and found opportunities to slip away by abandoning their loads and fleeing. This was, however, most inconvenient for a man who had planned to undertake such a journey. But, gentlemen, what happened now? In order to discourage any further desertions, Dr. Peters ordered the Gallas, in whose territory he was at that point, to “cut down” any runaway Somalis who refused to return to him.[4] (“Listen! Listen!”[5] from the left. Agitation to the right.) Now, do you consider this a humane act, that people, having come to realize that they cannot endure the heavy strains being placed upon them over the long term and trying to escape from the commitments they have made, should be punished by instructing a tribe as wild and bellicose as the Gallas to “cut down” any of the fugitives their caravan encounters? Can you reconcile this with any sense of humanity, of humanitarian virtues, of Christian convictions?

[...]

On page 197 of his book, Peters relates how one member of the entourage he had taken from Zanzibar became emaciated from the great exertion. He then tells what happened to this poor devil: “Unhappily, on that evening, one of my porters from Dar-es-Salam, Amdallah, was left behind. He had for some time suffered from consumption, and I had long since relieved him of his burden. The lions, which roared on that night louder than usual behind us, unfortunately left no doubt as to the poor fellow’s fate.”[6] (“Listen! Listen!” from the left.) With such words, a man who served Dr. Peters until his strength gave out entirely is discarded. He is exhausted, unable to march on, collapsed; he is left to collapse, and the lions who trail along behind the caravan devour him in the night. That was his reward for his efforts on behalf of Christian civilization! (Movement.)

[...]

Gentlemen, approximately two years after the events just described, in late 1891, Dr. Peters was part of an expedition to Kilimanjaro. He settled there for some time, and the first thing he did, aside from building a hut for himself, was to erect a gallows in order, so to speak, to express his dominance over the region. Now, Dr. Peters had, as is customary for the civilizers over there in Africa except in the case of missionaries, as I would again point out, taken a native woman as his concubine. I won’t go any further into the details of how he had acquired her. This concubine was a very attractive Chaga girl named Jagodja [*Gidschagga*], a sister of the chief Manamia in Mamba. Jagodja, scarcely satisfied with the forced caresses of Dr. Peters, began an intimate relationship with one of his servants, a man named Mabruk. Dr. Peters learned of this and immediately ordered that the young girl and the young man should be hung from the gallows (movement [in the chamber]), because the young girl had betrayed his trust. The officer of the expedition in question, Lieutenant Bronsart von Schellendorf, who is still in East Africa today, was ordered to carry out the execution of the two young people. He refused to do so, presumably saying to himself: “This is murder, I will have nothing to do with it, it is incompatible with my honor as an officer, with my honor as a human, I will not give in to it.” And he refused. Then the lazaret attendant was commanded to do so, and although the two young people begged on their knees for their lives, it was to no avail, they were hanged. (Movement. “Listen! Listen!” from the left.)

Dr. Peters later declared—after his handling of the event had created a stir across large parts of Africa and had deleterious effects for us Germans, too, as I will still show—that he did not have the young

people hanged for the relationship that they had carried on behind his back, but that they had been guilty of treason in that they had committed acts of espionage. Gentlemen, if this had been the case, if Dr. Peters would have been able to prove it, even been able to prove suspicions, that the two young people were guilty of such treachery, then the commanding officer, Lieutenant Bronsart von Schellendorff would certainly not have hesitated for a single moment to go through with the execution of the traitors. ("Very right!" [from the] left.) This would have even been his duty. He did not do so, and this is the first indication that the matter did not develop as Dr. Peters has claimed; otherwise Lieutenant Bronsart von Schellendorf would have been charged with gross indiscipline and failure to follow orders. ("Very true!" from the left.) Nothing of the sort can be found in the files of the colonial department, however.

A short time later, Dr. Peters wanted to visit the English mission in Moshi. Bishop Tucker, the leader of the mission there, wrote to him, however, that *he wanted nothing to do with a murderer*. ("Listen! Listen!" from the left. Movement.) The bishop, in other words, rejected any association with Dr. Peters while accusing him of *murder*. This matter is naturally quite unsettling for Dr. Peters, and he subsequently wrote a letter to Bishop Tucker claiming as follows that he was, according to African customs, married, so to speak, to the hanged girl, and that, according to African law, he was authorized to sentence the adulterer to death. (Great movement.)

Gentlemen, the astonishing thing about this letter is that a representative of German culture and German civilization in Africa suddenly claims for himself African rights, ("Very right!") and places himself on par with the *barbarians*, saying: I am your equal here; I will conduct myself, as you do; now I demand the same rights as you; the girl committed adultery towards me, since I was actually her husband, and thus I have the right to hang the perpetrator on the next tree, as I did. Now, however, the following should be noted here: in Africa there is no legal custom of this kind regarding adulterers. Anyone who knows much about the cultural situation of Africa at all knows that, if a husband learns a woman has committed an act of adultery in the European sense, it would result at the most in a sound thrashing and nothing more. It would never occur to the man to hang the woman from the gallows, for he would thereby lose a valuable object, an important tool, for it is the women who do most of the work and satisfy the daily needs. There is no doubt about this. In central Africa, the concept of marriage is so much looser and radically different than our concepts that it would never occur to a single African man—neither a chief nor anyone else—to kill a so-called adulterer on account of her adultery. I have received very interesting reports in this respect. But the important thing is that Dr. Peters attempts to place himself on par with the African natives and to justify his behavior to the bishop, who is familiar with these circumstances and apparently understood by what standard he should appraise Dr. Peters' actions.

[...]

Dr. Peters' conduct is general knowledge in Africa, where it has been talked about for years and resurfaces again and again. Now, if a person of whom such things are said is considered for a position of great responsibility in the colonies on behalf of the German empire, a position that he currently does not hold only because it did not suit him to accept it, when this person furthermore fills a role that he notoriously fills in Germany, then it is necessary that the accusations against him be investigated thoroughly. ("Very right!" [from the] left.) In addition to the files of the Church Missionary Society in which Dr. Peters' letter is published, I name the following individuals as witnesses: 1) in addition to Bishop Tucker from the now disbanded outpost in Moshi, the two men Hamilton and Kenrick; 2) Mr. Steckel from the English mission in Taveta; 3) Father Gomengingen from the Catholic mission of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Kilema; 4) the Bavarian First Lieutenant von Pechmann, who was with Dr. Peters during the hanging episode; 5) Dr. Oscar Baumann, who has traveled in Africa and is now the Austrian Consul in Zanzibar; 6) Lieutenant Bronsart von Schellendorf and the lazeret attendant, Petty Officer Wiest, Sergeant Wilhelm, Petty Officer Brockelt, and Petty Officer Wittstock. Furthermore, I name the following

men who were in East Africa at the time or shortly thereafter and have likewise heard the story of the hanging: the painter Kunert, Count from Schweinitz, Professor Dr. Volkens, Baron von Eltz, and Dr. Stuhlmann.

This is then a long list of witnesses that I feel obligated to name here, so that the imperial government might be put in a position to conduct a thorough investigation and prove whether or not there is any truth in these extremely dire allegations, the worst that can be alleged of any person.

[...]

NOTES

[1] *Wartegeld*, literally “waiting money”—trans.

[2] Published in English translation in 1891 as Carl Peters, *New Light on Dark Africa: Being the Narrative of the German Emin Pasha Expedition*. Trans. by Henry William Dulcken. London, New York, and Melbourne: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1891. Available online at: <https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.04777>.

[3] See Peters, *New Light*, 58.

[4] See Peters, *New Light*, 85.

[5] *Hört! Hört!* is the German equivalent to “Hear! Hear!,” but was used in this period to convey more than approval, depending on the intonation and context, and “Hear! Hear!” originally had the sense of “hear [listen to] him!” See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hear,_hear—trans.

[6] Peters, *New Light*, 210.

Source: August Bebel, “Rede vor dem Deutschen Reichstag, 13. März 1896,” *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags*, 9. Legislaturperiode, IV. Session 1896/97, vol. 2. (Berlin: 1896), p. 1432–35; reprinted in August Bebel, *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, 14 vols., vol. 4, *Reden und Schriften. Januar 1896 bis Dezember 1899*, ed. by Anneliese Beske et al., Munich: K.G. Saur, 1995, p. 7–14.

Translation: Ellen Yutzy Glebe

Recommended Citation: August Bebel Accuses the Colonialist Carl Peters of Two Murders (1896), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-5086>> [July 11, 2025].