

August Bebel's Reichstag Speech against Colonial Policy in German East Africa (January 26, 1889)

Abstract

In February 1885, the German colonial ruler and administrator Carl Peters (1856–1918) received a Royal Patent of Patronage for the territory of German East Africa, which included present-day Rwanda, Burundi, the continental portion of Tanzania, and a small part of Mozambique. The conduct of Peters' German East Africa Company [Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft] sparked anger among indigenous populations, leading to a rebellion that started in August 1888. An irritated Bismarck was forced to accept official state administration of the area by means of a bill introduced in the Reichstag in January 1889. The bill purported to commit German forces against the slave trade, but the real goal was to put down the rebellion and gain control over Peters' enterprise. In the following excerpt from the Reichstag debates, August Bebel (1840–1913), Germany's leading Social Democrat, voices strong opposition to German colonialism.

Source

Gentlemen, if I understood Reichstag Deputy Dr. Windthorst correctly, he is prepared to approve the two million Marks demanded. (Heckling: "Back to your seat." Bell.) — Gentlemen, if you calmed down a bit, you would hear what I have to say. Furthermore, he was prepared to give the Reich Chancellor [Otto von Bismarck] the responsibility of utilizing these two million Marks; moreover, in his concluding remarks he also declared his willingness to grant additional funds, if the Reich government deemed it necessary. I fail to grasp how Deputy Dr. Windthorst can attach any particular significance to a possible Committee consultation after such a declaration. I can think of only one reason for it. Just now, these gentlemen based their views on the fact that a particular enthusiasm for colonial policy can supposedly be found in the German Reich. Gentlemen, as far as I can gauge the mood of the German population, there is no trace of any such enthusiasm to be found anywhere. If some such enthusiasm possibly existed four or five years ago, the events and disappointments that have taken place in the meantime have caused it to disappear. Today, the colonial question leaves the vast majority of the German people cold to the very core [*kühl bis ins Herz hinein*]. I will take this one step further by saying that if the overwhelming majority of the Reichstag approves the demands of the government, as will undoubtedly happen, you will not be able to say that you are in agreement with the majority of the people. In my view, the German people are not inclined to embark on the types of colonial adventures expected of us here. In order to create the impression that all sorts of important matters were debated in the Committee, it appears that one would need a Committee consultation.

Gentlemen, what was particularly obvious to me about the whole bill is the fact that its motivation, as presented to us by the federated German governments, is seriously inconsistent with itself. At the outset of this justification, it is argued that the guiding principles of German colonial policy, as approved by the Reichstag during official debate in 1884 and 1885, continue to be authoritative even to this day. Furthermore, it is argued that the main issue had been to safeguard the territory slated for colonization against disruptions and interventions by other colonial powers; any other difficulties and embarrassments that might arise from the colonization of the occupied territory, however, did not concern the Reich. Rather, they were entirely the concern of those persons who had taken the colonization of the respective lands into their own hands.

Gentlemen, if these principles were still authoritative today, as has been claimed, then the government

could not possibly approach the Reichstag with this demand, but the further justification of the matter contradicts this claim and expresses the exact opposite. Here, the argument goes as follows: now that the East Africa Company has been thrown out of its colonial possessions, in my view through its own fault, now that it is no longer capable of fulfilling the task that it had set itself in its own interests, the Reich must advocate on behalf of the objectives of the East Africa Company. Well, then, what is this East Africa Company? It is a small circle of big capitalists, bankers, merchants, and industrialists, i.e., a small circle of very rich people whose interests have nothing at all to do with the interests of the German people; who as far as this whole colonial policy is concerned have nothing but their own personal interests in mind. It is a small circle which, as Dr. Bamberger stated on the basis of certain comments made in the official organ of the East Africa Company, pursued the sole objective of securing greater resources to grow rich vis-à-vis a weaker population in any way possible. We will never consent to such a colonial policy. Basically, the essence of all colonial policy is the exploitation of a foreign population to the highest degree. Wherever we look at the history of colonial policy over the last three centuries, we encounter violent acts and the oppression of native peoples, and not infrequently this ends in their complete extermination. And the driving force is always the acquisition of gold, gold, and more gold. And in order to go on exploiting the African population to the fullest possible extent, preferably undisturbed, millions are to be spent from the pockets of the Reich, from the pockets of the taxpayers; the East Africa Company is to be supported with funds of the Reich in order to secure its business of exploitation. You will readily appreciate that we, as opponents of any form of oppression, will not lend any support to this.

I will go further and say that even if a European or German colonial society were to cultivate the East African territories placed under the German protectorate, no advantage whatsoever would arise for the inhabitants of the respective countries. In part, the manners and customs of these peoples, even if they are in slavery, differ quite favorably from those in the European countries. At a recent lecture in Dresden by Dr. Hans Meyer, also a traveler of Africa, we learned that the situation of slaves under slaveholders in the interior African districts is actually often much better than that of our German, our European, workers. Among other things, this lecture pointed out that African slaves get two days off a week. Gentlemen, if the German worker were to make such a demand, I would like to witness the storm of outcry that would be raised in the farthest entrepreneurial circles. Furthermore, it is a fact that the work here in Germany is much more exhausting than that expected of slaves by their slaveholders, and that the slaves' workday is on average one hour shorter than those put in by German workers on behalf of their employers. However, the experience and history of all colonies has shown that as soon as Europeans—and it is always the entrepreneurial class that is meant in these cases—gain a foothold in a foreign country and exploit the land in as many different ways as possible, the bad manners, habits, and customs of Europeans take root. These alone are implemented vis-à-vis the native population and are even exaggerated to the utmost. Very soon working hours become appallingly long everywhere; the native population is treated in a manner exhibiting the least possible consideration for their material or physical welfare. This is simple to explain. Even in the eyes of many of our civilized European entrepreneurs, the worker is merely an instrument, a tool that must be exploited as much as possible. This applies even more to the races at a lower level of development, the ones regarded as inferior and against whom a certain contempt and great hatred arises instinctively. One becomes too easily accustomed to seeing in a black person a human of inferior race, someone against whom one can take any liberty, someone whose treatment is governed by no limit other than that of personal convenience, of the entrepreneur's greatest advantage. As a result of this view, we see that wherever Europeans force their way into such colonial territories, and wherever the native population on the whole is always at a lower cultural stage, these brutally egotistical maxims spread and continuously lead to rebellions and revolts against the entrepreneurs—just as we have already experienced during the brief attempt at administration made by the East Africa Company in the German protectorates in East Africa.

[...]

It is maintained that the goals are to spread European civilization, European culture, to spread Christianity, and above all to end the horrible slave trade and the slave hunts. But Gentlemen, you do not wish to abolish the central cause of the slave trade and the slave hunts in the first place—slavery in and of itself. So far, not one of you has even thought of emphasizing or even hinting at that. On the contrary, in the previous debate, we heard from the mouth of the Reich Chancellor, and from the mouths of Mr. von Helldorff, Mr. Stöcker, and others, that slavery in Africa was a necessity; that the slaves, if they were freed, would actually not know what to do with themselves. Moreover, the Reich Chancellor specifically pointed out that abolishing slavery in Africa would be a bold undertaking because it would be impossible without compensating the slaveholders. Well, I do not at all understand why that ought to happen. If an unlawful force exerted by one person over another—like slavery—is supposed to be abolished, then I, for my part, fail to comprehend why this should be impossible without compensation. I would just like to remind you that when the United States abolished slavery, it occurred without any compensation, as the consequence of a great war.

[...]

Now then, Gentlemen, if you pass this bill, what sort of relationship will the German Empire enter into with the East Africa Company? Do you really think that the German Empire has the East Africa Company under control? I don't think so; the exact opposite is probably the case: The East Africa Company has the Reich under control. In reality, the Reich Chancellor, or whoever assumes this position, will be nothing more than the first administrative official of the East Africa Company.

(Laughter on the right.)

Now I ask, however: What kind of guarantee has this Company offered thus far to allow one to even assume that it could in any way fulfill the tasks you have set for it? None whatsoever! The Company is supposed to be an institution of the German people! The German people do not even know the persons comprising the East Africa Company. What is abundantly evident, however, is that the East Africa Company will not deign to fulfill the so-called civilizing mission that you have assigned to it, since it is an organization devoted to the exploitation of the East African protectorate and the East African population. The Company will only think of safeguarding its own interests. Now there is no doubt, however, that if the East Africa Company is to be maintained as an institution with the support and aid of the Reich we will most certainly find ourselves in one embarrassing situation after another.

Mr. von Bunningsen, however, displayed magnificent optimism with his previous words. He acted as though the sacrifices made by the German Empire were minimal enough to warrant no consideration and that soon enough they would no longer even be necessary. Gentlemen, not even the Reich government is that optimistic. We can see this at the end of the current bill, which states in sober terms that, if the sum demanded now is not enough, then the government will come up with new funds, which will simply have to be allocated to the Reich budget. The entire history of colonization proves to us that it is extremely likely that this will be the case. To top it all off, we have also learned from the sentiments voiced in the Reichstag in the course of various debates that a majority of the Reichstag will not shrink from very significant sacrifices, no matter how great they may be.

[...]

I also have confidence in the German people, [and believe] that once it learns about such a colonial policy, it will oppose and protest it in the most decisive manner by voting accordingly. Gentlemen, to involve us in this type of adventure, without the faintest prospect of it being advantageous to the overwhelming majority of the population—whereas, on the contrary, all the benefits from such an undertaking will go to a small minority of the rich, who, if they wish to increase their wealth may do so at their own cost—that is something we cannot get enthusiastic about, and it is my firm conviction that the

German people will not get enthusiastic about it either, once it understands clearly where this path of colonial policy will lead.

However, once we end up stuck on the fever-ridden coasts of East Africa, a whole range of other demands will confront us; then the most important argument will be: After we have sacrificed and spent so much property and blood for those lands, it is a matter of national honor to preserve them; whatever the cost may be, we must defend them. At that moment, it will be necessary above all to substantially increase the navy—Mr. von Kardorff is already nodding at me in agreement; furthermore, it will be necessary to maintain a significant number of colonial troops financed from imperial funds. And then the argument will be: We must build up our navy in such a way that in the event of a European crisis, we will be capable of adequately protecting and defending not only our native coasts but also our colonies in foreign countries.

In this way, you will be driven forward with your colonial policy step-by-step, without being able to imagine even faintly what kind of sacrifices you may be expected to make. In my view, however, no one who is at all aware of the situation and who has observed the course of events can have any doubt that it will come to this.

[...]

For our part, we declare that we will vote against this bill, regardless of whether this stance is described as some kind of treason or high treason. I also declare that I do not have enough confidence in the current leadership of German Reich policy to believe that it will, insofar as it has its officials in Africa, make any particular efforts to conduct the colonization of the territory in a truly humane and so-called Christian manner. Gentlemen, a system that immediately imposes emergency acts on any bothersome party, a system that has cold-bloodedly driven tens and tens of thousands of peaceful inhabitants across national borders in a ruthless fashion, a system that so far has stubbornly refused to grant workers at home much-needed protective legislation, a system that ruthlessly strives to destroy any personal adversary through all sorts of persecution and lawsuits—we have no trust in such a system and will not follow it.

(“Bravo!” from the Social Democrats.)

Source: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags*, 7th legislative period, 27th sitting (January 26, 1889), 1888/89, vol. 1. Berlin, 1889, pp. 627–31. Available online at: https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt3_k7_bsb00018653_00649.html. Original German text reprinted in August Bebel, *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, vol. 2, *Erster Halbband 1878 bis 1890*, edited by Ursula Herrmann et al. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1978, pp. 523–33.

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