

Bismarck on “Pragmatic” Colonization (June 26, 1884)

Abstract

Bismarck disliked the idea of acquiring formal colonies because they promised large expenditures, meager profits, and diplomatic complications. Nevertheless, in the early 1880s the colonial propaganda of writers like Friedrich Fabri (1824–1891) forced him to address the issue. One reason he relented in 1884/85, cautiously and reluctantly, was that the colonial issue might benefit pro-government parties in the upcoming Reichstag elections. In this speech, Bismarck tries to explain his pragmatic approach without appearing to be lukewarm on an issue that stirred nationalist hearts.

Source

As regards the colonial question in the narrower sense of the words, I will explain its genesis. We were first induced, owing to the enterprise of the Hanseatic people—beginning with land purchases and leading to requests for imperial protection—to consider whether we could promise protection to the extent desired. I have not abandoned my former aversion to colonies—I will not say colonies after the system mostly adopted last century, the French system, as it might now be called—but colonies which make a strip of land their foundation, and then seek to draw emigrants, appoint officials, and establish garrisons. This mode of colonization may be good for other countries, but it is not practicable for us. I do not believe that colonial projects can be artificially established, and all the examples which Deputy Bamberger advanced as warnings in committee were cases in which the wrong way had been taken: where people had wished to construct harbors where there was no traffic and build towns where there were no people, the intention being to attract people by artificial means to the place. A very different question is whether it is expedient, and whether it is the duty of the German Empire [Reich], to grant imperial protection and a certain amount of support in their colonial endeavors to those of its subjects who devote themselves to such undertakings relying upon the protection of the Empire, in order that security may be ensured in foreign lands to the communities which grow naturally out of the superfluous strength of the German body politic. This question I answer affirmatively: I do so reservedly from the standpoint of expediency—because I cannot predict what will come of it—but I do so unconditionally from the standpoint of the state’s duty.

[...]

My intention, as approved by the Emperor [Kaiser], is to leave the responsibility for the material development of a colony, as well as its inauguration, to the action and the enterprise of our seafaring and trading citizens, and to proceed less on the system of annexing the transoceanic provinces to the German Empire than that of granting charters, after the form of the English Royal Charters, encouraged by the glorious career which the English merchants experienced in the foundation of the East India Company; also to leave to the persons interested in the colony the government of the same, only granting them European jurisdiction for Europeans and so much protection as we may be able to afford without maintaining garrisons.

I think, too, that a colony of this kind should possess a representative of imperial authority with the title of consul or resident, whose duty it would be to receive complaints; while the disputes which might arise out of these commercial enterprises would be decided by one of our maritime or mercantile courts at Bremen, Hamburg, or somewhere else.

Our intention is not to establish provinces but rather to protect commercial enterprises. We will,

however, use the most advanced methods to ensure their free development and to protect them against attacks from their immediate neighbors and from oppression and damage wrought by other European powers. This even includes those enterprises that acquire sovereignty, a commercial sovereignty that ultimately means that the enterprise remains in a dependent relationship with the German Empire and stays under its patronage. Apart from this, we also hope that the tree will thrive overall through the activities of the gardeners who planted it. And if it fails to do so, then the plant is a failure, but the damage will have less of an impact on the Empire—since the costs we demand are not significant—than on the entrepreneurs who have adopted the wrong approach for their projects. Herein lies the difference: In the system that I called the French one, the national government always wants to assess whether each enterprise is appropriate and warrants the prospect of success; in our system, on the other hand, we leave the choice to trade interests, to the private person, and if we see that the tree puts down roots, grows, and thrives, and then calls on the Empire for protection, we will stand by it, and I fail to see how we can lawfully deny it that assistance.

Source of English translation: (with slight edits) William Harbutt Dawson, *Bismarck and State Socialism: An Exposition of the Social and Economic Legislation of Germany since 1870*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1891, pp. 149–51. Available online at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo1.ark:/13960/t4xh0505x&view=1up&seq=1>. Reprinted in Theodore S. Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck: Documents and Interpretations*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973, pp. 305–7. [Please note: the final paragraph was omitted from Hamerow’s anthology. It was translated by Erwin Fink for *German History in Documents and Images*.]

Source of original German text: Otto von Bismarck, *Werke in Auswahl. Jahrhundertausgabe zum 23. September 1862*, edited by Gustav Adolf Rein, vol. 7, *Reichsgestaltung und Europäische Friedenswahrung*, pt. 3, 1883–1890, edited by Alfred Milatz. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001, pp. 162–80, here 167, 169–70.

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