

Carl Peters on Socialist Opposition to Colonial Policy (January 9 and 16, 1886)

Abstract

The colonial ruler Carl Peters (1856–1918) “acquired” the territory of German East Africa in 1885 by means of a Royal Patent of Patronage. In the 1890s, he became an active member of the Pan-German League [Alldeutscher Verband] but caused a scandal when his murderous conduct in Africa was uncovered. The text below is an excerpt from an article that Peters published in 1886 in the *Kolonial-Politische Correspondenz*. Here, he explains that he loathes German Social Democracy because it has dared to criticize what he regards as Germany’s civilizing mission. Seen in the context of his other misdeeds, Peters’ claim to serve the “moral and material improvement” of foreign peoples is transparently racist and self-serving.

Source

The great goal of socialism—to raise the human standard of living, to exploit the victory won by man in his struggle for survival with his larger environment and thereby improve his welfare and enhance his power, this goal rests on a national foundation. The powers available for realizing it are national and tied to the changing fortunes of a national community.

Hence, socialism made a mistake if it gave itself the task of solving this problem not for its own nation but for the entire world, not for the lifespan of a people but for the relative eternity of human development.

Such an endeavor is hopeless by its very nature.

The struggle for existence will forever produce winners and losers; and as the land available for food cultivation shrinks and as elbowroom diminishes, it will constantly become more difficult for individuals.

Eliminating this struggle by means of a general peace agreement is a pipedream with no basis in either the history or the character of mankind. What we, on the other hand, wish to demonstrate in the following is the possibility of one nation gaining predominance in this struggle for a time and of this nation using this predominance as the basis for securing better living conditions and a more prosperous development for itself and thereby attaining a level of intellectual and material culture surpassing that of all other nations.

At the same time, it also follows automatically that, for us, socialism can only mean pointing Germany towards this predominance by exerting all our energies in full consciousness of our goal and by exhibiting total ruthlessness, thus solving, at least in our time and for our people, the social question [...].

Colonial policy wants only to increase the strength and enrich the life of the stronger, better race at the expense of the weaker, lesser one, and to exploit the uselessly stored riches of the latter for the benefit of the cultural progress of the former.

He who thinks that colonial policy aims only to achieve the moral and material improvement of foreign tribes is making an error—an error to which the Germans especially are prone and one that therefore must be refuted without ambiguity.

Allegedly, it is far-sighted enough to set this task as an excellent means to an end. This end, however, ultimately continues to be the ruthless and resolute enrichment of one's own nation at the expense of other, weaker peoples.

Source: *Kolonial-Politische Korrespondenz* (Berlin), vol. 2, January 9 and 16, 1886. Available online at: <https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/kolonialbibliothek/periodical/titleinfo/7803158>.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Carl Peters on Socialist Opposition to Colonial Policy (January 9 and 16, 1886), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1871>> [April 27, 2024].