

Friedrich Kapp, National Liberal Reichstag Deputy, Speaks out against “Colonial Chauvinism” (October 22, 1880)

Abstract

Not least due to domestic considerations, in 1884/85 a reluctant Bismarck responded to the public demand for colonies. Even though Bismarck's decision to join the “scramble for Africa” came with apparent suddenness, the colonialists' rallying cry—that Germany must have colonies to be considered a great power—had been heard for many years. Yet this campaign was not uncontested, even in its earlier phase and even among the political parties that generally supported expansionist German policies. In this address to the annual Congress of German Economists, the National Liberal Reichstag deputy Friedrich Kapp (1824–1884) speaks for those who criticized the colonial project. Kapp stresses both the unprofitability of colonies and their negative impact on Anglo-German relations.

Source

I now turn to an issue that our colonial chauvinists do not like to put in the foreground. Almost by way of apology they say: We only wish, after all, to advance gently into colonial matters and gradually gain a foothold there. Even the British will show understanding, and because they know that we are worthy fellows, they will calmly let us have our way. Well, no, gentlemen, it doesn't work that way, it takes two for such a heavenly state of affairs: one who says it and another who believes it; but nobody believes us in this case. The entire world regards us with suspicion, and most certainly the British do. To be sure, a private person may squeeze into a new and more influential position when he spots a good opportunity; a country, a great power, on the other hand, is forced to mobilize all its instruments of power in order to achieve and defend a new position. In that case, it cannot even shrink from risking war, and if it does not want war, its resentful neighbors will find a way to force it into conflict anyway. Yet our would-be colonizers cleverly keep quiet about this self-evident prospect. Their calculations go something like this: first we will push through our wishes, and then the others can take it from there. Vis-à-vis this kind of attitude, I would like to express my frank conviction that we can never found a colony, let alone maintain it, unless we are permanently prepared for war—and this includes a naval war that might possibly be fought out thousands of miles from home. And if we fail in such a war, do you mean to say that it would not have a detrimental effect on the mother country as well?

I already know in advance the answer I will get to this modest question. In the eyes of our colonial chauvinists, merely posing this question is tantamount to being a bad German, a doubter of our national mission, a belittler of our people, if not an outright enemy of the Reich. Such personal attacks, though, may be left unaddressed, because they do not constitute an objective attempt to refute [my arguments]. But we Germans have more important and pressing tasks to achieve than to needlessly burden ourselves with difficulties, to get caught up with foreign continents, and to seek adventures that could easily end in completely unnecessary wars. All we need from other continents is coal and naval stations for the protection of our trade; anything more than that is extremely ill-advised.

Source: M. Broemel, ed., *Bericht über die Verhandlungen des 19. Kongresses Deutscher Volkswirte in Berlin am 21., 22. und 23. Oktober 1880*. Berlin, 1880, pp. 110–49, here 129–30; reprinted in Hans

Fenske, ed., *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871–1890*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, pp. 258–59.

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