

Bernhard von Bülow on Germany's "Place in the Sun" (1897)

Abstract

Bernhard von Bülow (1849–1929), who served as Reich chancellor from 1900 to 1909, gave his famous speech on Germany's "place in the sun" when he was foreign minister. His vision of Germany as a colonial power became the ideological foundation of German naval expansion, which began shortly thereafter.

Source

[...] Representative Dr. Schoenlank seemed to fear that we will get involved in a risky adventure in East Asia. Have no fear, Gentlemen! The chancellor is not the man and his staff is not the body to pursue a futile undertaking. We definitely do not feel the need to have a finger in every pie. But we believe it is inadvisable, from the outset, to exclude Germany from competition with other nations in lands with a rich and promising future.

("Bravo!")

The days when Germans granted one neighbor the earth, the other the sea, and reserved for themselves the sky, where pure doctrine reigns –

(Laughter – "Bravo!")

those days are over. We see it as our foremost task to foster and cultivate the interests of our shipping, our trade, and our industry, particularly in the East.

A division of our cruisers was dispatched to and occupied the port of Kiaochow to secure full atonement for the murder of German and Catholic missionaries and to assure greater security against the recurrence of such events in the future. Negotiations are underway towards these ends. Due to the nature of diplomatic negotiations and proceedings I am compelled to weigh my words with extreme care, but this much I can say: we have only benevolent and kind intentions toward China.

(Laughter on the left)

We do not want to affront or provoke China. Despite the grave injustice that we have suffered, the occupation of the port of Kiaochow has been carried out with utmost care. We hope for a continuance of the friendship that has bound Germany and China for such a long time and that has not been disrupted in the past. But a precondition for the continuance of this friendship is mutual respect for each other's rights. The massacre of our missionaries was the obvious, compelling reason for our intervention, since we did not believe that these devout people, who were pursuing their sacred offices in peace, could be regarded as outside the law.

("Very good!")

But apart from this sad occurrence, we have a number of other complaints to make against China. We hope that we succeed in resolving them amicably in respectful negotiations, yet we cannot allow the opinion to prevail in China that liberties can be taken with us that would not be taken with others.

("Very true!" "Bravo!")

We must demand that German missionaries, merchants, goods, as well as the German flag and German vessels be treated with the same respect in China that other powers enjoy.

(Loud applause)

We are happy to respect the interests of other powers in China, secure in the knowledge that our own interests will also receive the recognition they deserve.

("Bravo!")

In short, we do not want to put anyone in our shadow, but we also demand our place in the sun.

("Bravo!")

True to the tradition of German policy, we will make every effort to protect our rights and interests in East Asia and West India – without unnecessary harshness, but without weakness either.

(Lively applause)

Source: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags*. IX LP, 5th Session, Vol. 1, Berlin, 1898, p. 60; reprinted in Rüdiger vom Bruch and Björn Hofmeister, eds., *Kaiserreich und Erster Weltkrieg 1871–1918*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, vol. 8. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 2000, pp. 268–70.

Translation: Adam Blauhut

Recommended Citation: Bernhard von Bülow on Germany's "Place in the Sun" (1897), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:document-783>> [September 26, 2025].