Carl Peters on the Motives which Drove Him to East Africa (1898)

Abstract

Carl Peters was an ardent colonialist, explorer, author, opportunist, colonial administrator, and propagandist. He was the founder of the German East Africa Company (Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft) in 1885, which attempted to both administer and economically exploit the new German colony of East Africa. Mismanagement in both provoked a rebellion in 1889, which in turn forced the German government to take over the colony directly. Peters initially achieved his fame in Germany after a well-publicized African expedition to "rescue" Emin Pasha in 1890 (though he was beaten to the punch by Henry Morton Stanley). By the early 1890s, however, Peters was a German Imperial Commissioner in East Africa, and his brutality—including use of summary executions—sparked a scandal back in Germany. (August Bebel and the Social Democrats referred to Peters' actions to criticize the German state's colonial policy as "written with blood and tears.") In this retrospective written in 1898, Peters openly and bluntly describes his motivations and his worldview.

Source

My own justification, the proof that my treatment of the Africans is correct, I think I will provide later; I will then wait calmly to see whom future developments will prove right. I did not go to Africa to make the natives happy. I had no internal or external reason to do so—just as I have not found that the Africans feel a special need to go to Europe to make us happy. Rather, I have pursued colonial policy in order to serve my own countrymen and the power of the German Empire. But I have always believed that this indirectly benefits the interests of the Negro world as well; and all the more so the more resolutely it is transferred to the new economic order, whereby, of course, violent measures cannot always be avoided. I am convinced that in every colonial policy everything depends on the economic advantages that the colonizing people gain from it, and such advantages can only be utilized if the exploitation and development of the new countries is carried out according to the principles of common sense. As far as I know world history, no great successes have ever been achieved with academic theories and utopias.

[…]

Unless one has special interests to pursue there, I would advise against emigrating either to Rio de Janeiro or to Dar-es-Salam. In both places the danger of the illness of the fever is present, although East Africa does not have the murderous yellow fever as it rages in Brazil. On the coast of East Africa, as on that of Brazil, the European race, even if it should succeed in establishing itself there hereditarily, must degenerate over several generations, as happened to the Spaniards in Central and South America and to the Portuguese in Central Africa and Goa.

[…]

Source of original German text: Carl Peters, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. by Walter Frank Berlin and Munich, 1943, pp 393–4.

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