

# Matthias Erzberger's Critique of Kiautschou (1908)

## Abstract

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Matthias Erzberger was a member of the Reichstag for the Catholic Center Party since 1903 and became that party's expert on colonial and budgetary issues. In this Reichstag speech from 1908, Erzberger denounces the huge sums sunk into the German colony of Kiaochow (Jiaozhou Bay, *Kiautschou*) on the Chinese coast that had shown little benefit to Germany. In 1921 Erzberger, who was one of the signatories of the Versailles Treaty after the First World War, would be assassinated by right-wing extremists.

## Source

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In his speech, the State Secretary pointed out what we have achieved in Kiautschou. Also the latest official memorandum, a very interesting work, draws the result of the ten-year activity of the Germans in the Kiautschou area, who have created an ultra-modern seaside resort from this Chinese slum. But there is one thing I miss in the interesting memorandum: everything is listed in terms of development and increase in trade. Only one figure is missing, which affects us Germans so hard, namely that 110 million in government subsidies have been paid.

(Hear! hear! From the center.)

It would do credit to the objectivity of the author if he had told us this figure in the memorandum. These are the monies we have spent. I believe that if the 110 million were spent in Germany, we could—to quote Representative Bebel—make the Mark Brandenburg into the most beautiful garden on earth. Quite profitable cultural work could also be done in the homeland if we were to put 110 million into an area not even the size of a proper Prussian district, into an area that is only the size of the Free City of Bremen. We must always keep the sum of 110 million marks in mind if we are to properly appreciate the achievements of the Naval Administration, which I certainly recognize.

In view of this expenditure for Kiautschou, it must not be disregarded that Kiautschou can hardly be considered as a naval station as it was originally planned. We must be glad if we can maintain a fleet in Europe, in the North and Baltic Seas, so strong that any adversary of Germany will be wary of quarreling with us. But to hold a large naval station of our own in East Asia, if this was ever the plan, has been abandoned in principle.

Instead, they now say: Kiautschou is to become a German cultural center. Yes, gentlemen, if we wanted to start building German cultural centers all over the world, it would cost us very dearly.

(Very true! From the center.)

As far as the trade development of the port in particular is concerned, I do not deny at all that exports and imports in the port have increased a great deal, but not to our advantage, since all the expenditure we made on Kiautschou is by and large to the benefit of the Japanese and Chinese.

(Hear! hear! From the center.)

[...] But now, in view of the great expenditure for the Reich, which thus amounts to 30 million marks a year, what is all the trade to China? — In 1900, exports amounted to 43.7 million marks; in 1902, 37.9 million marks; in 1904, 52.9 million marks; in 1906 [...] 67.8 million marks.

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So we are faced with the following result: 50 percent of the total German export of 1906 with 67.8 million, i.e. about 30 million Marks, we have to spend *à fonds perdu* to be able to protect this export trade to China. [...]

It is not going too far to say that this budget shows a waste of money on an almost unheard-of scale.

Source of original German text: Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstages, Bd. 231, Berlin 1908, S. 4174 f., 4195 f. Reprinted in: Horst Gründer, „... *da und dort ein junges Deutschland gründen.*“ *Rassismus, Kolonien und kolonialer Gedanke vom 16. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert.* Munich, 1999, pp. 172-173.

Translation: Insa Kummer

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