

Rosa Luxemburg, “Does Germany Need Colonies?” (1899)

Abstract

With the help of trade statistics, Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) simply asks whether acquiring German colonies was really in the best interest of the German economy. Her skepticism about German armament policies and her anti-imperialist philosophy made her a contentious political figure. She was often imprisoned for her views.

Source

As is well known, the primary reason given for the new naval and colonial plans is trade interests. In response to this, we must quote Mr. Bounderby from Dickens’s *Hard Times*, calling out loud and clear: Facts and figures! Figures and facts!

The latest statistical data on Germany’s foreign trade, published in the official *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs* [*Statistics of the German Reich*], presents this issue in an interesting light. In 1898, our trade with individual parts of the globe was as follows:

In 1,000 Marks	Imports from	Exports to
Europe	3,577,999	3,429,917
America	1,329,216	541,774
Asia	339,336	172,157
Africa	101,168	67,362
Australia	88,295	35,081

More than nine-tenths of all foreign trade was conducted with countries in Europe and America. We did not initiate trade with these partners by means of torpedo boats, nor is it possible for us to use torpedo boats to expand and strengthen these relations. Rather, the expansion of trade with these countries has always been directly related to our trade policy, which has been characterized by a decrease in exports to America from 609 million marks in 1897 to 541.8 million marks in 1898 – undoubtedly the result of a prohibitive customs policy for industrial goods that was the American counterpart to our protective agricultural duties.

But it is even more interesting to learn that even in that part of the world where we already have colonies, these “protectorates” play only a tiny role in trade. German trade with the most important African regions developed as follows over the last decade:

In Millions of Marks	Imports from		Exports to	
	1889	1898	1889	1898
Egypt	2.0	24.6	2.9	11.7
Cape Colony	13.6	19.8	7.5	14.7
British, French, and Portuguese West Africa	16.1	33.4	4.4	11.3

British, French, and Portuguese East Africa	2.9	5.5	1.3	3.0
German West and Southwest Africa	4.4	3.8	4.2	7.3
German East Africa	0.3	0.6	0.3	3.3

Based on these figures, our own colonies play only a minuscule role compared with our trade with Egypt and Cape Colony, as well as with the English, French, and Portuguese regions in Africa.

The above facts and figures show with the desired clarity that it wouldn't make the least difference to our foreign trade if our entire battle fleet evaporated into thin air. And anyone who intends to try his hand at world politics should at least refrain from hypocritically referring to "trade interests."

Source: Rosa Luxemburg, "Brauchen Wir Kolonien?", *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, December 4, 1899; reprinted in Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*. East Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1970, vol. 1, pp. 642–43.

Translation: Adam Blauhut

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