

# **Resources and Racism: Justifying the German Colonial Empire**

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## Abstract

From any practical perspective, the German colonial empire looks like a complete disaster. For the sake a disparate collection of distant and generally unproductive swathes of land, the German government sacrificed hundreds of millions of marks and a good portion of its international reputation. How can such a self-injurious course be explained? Many scholars have attempted to answer this question, but few have examined the justifications that imperial Germans themselves gave for their pursuit of world empire. Such an examination is carried out in this paper. Through such an examination, we find that the dominant arguments in favor of colonial expansion fall into two categories: economic arguments and *völkisch* arguments. The Economic arguments asserted that colonial possession would result in a variety of economic benefits for Germany, including independence from foreign imports and markets for manufactured goods. The *völkisch* arguments based themselves on a hyper-nationalist and racist worldview that saw human history as an endless conflict, in which a race had only two options, expansion or annihilation. A number of the most puzzling aspects of German colonialism can be clarified through an examination of these arguments.

In 1884, when Germany claimed Tanganyika (modern day Tanzania) as its first colony, there was not much room left in the world for empire building. The French and the British had already divided most of Africa and the Middle-East between themselves, Britain ruled India and was dominating trade with China, and Latin America had been almost fully incorporated into the North American and British economies. In 1918, When Germany was forced to give up its empire as a result of its defeat in World War I, it gave up the third largest colonial empire in the world. Germany achieved this rapid colonial expansion by applying two rather straight forward tactics: the first was to badger the other colonial powers into granting concessions; the second was to claim whatever land the other powers did not want, including the Kalahari Desert in Southwest Africa, The impenetrable jungles of Cameroon, and a portion of the remote island of New Guinea.

Apologists for this hodge-podge empire would usually claim that it was needed to ensure economic stability, to maintain diplomatic security, or to provide places for emigrant settlement. But none of these arguments are compelling. Economically, the colonies were failures. They never became significant trading partners with Germany and were operated at a continual loss by the German government. Diplomatically, they were disastrous. The aggressive means employed in their acquisition alienated Germany from both France and England. As sites for emigrant settlement the colonies were nearly useless, never supporting a population of more than 25,000 colonists from the homeland. As one critic remarked, the colonies could never sustain a large settler population because “the fertile colonies were unhealthy, [and] the healthy colonies were infertile.”<sup>1</sup>

But if all these explanations fail, how can Germany’s commitment to its futile colonial project be explained? Historians have offered various answers. Many of these answers revolved

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<sup>1</sup> W.O. Henderson, *Studies in German Colonial History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books 1962), 35.

around an examination of Germany's rulers, the emperors and the conservative, anti-modern aristocracy that surrounded the throne. Some, Such as A.J.P. Taylor, focused on Bismarck's diplomatic calculations and on Wilhelm II's blundering bids for power, while others, like Hans Ulrich Wehler, focused on the political machinations of the unpopular but intransigent German government, which sought to distract a dissatisfied populace with reports of imperial glory.<sup>2</sup> Both of these analyses shed light on the nature of German colonialism, but they fail to fully explain the phenomenon because they ignore public opinion as an active political force within Imperial Germany. Taylor committed this error most egregiously, stating that "To imagine that Bismarck was influenced by public opinion ... is to transfer to Germany the conception of constitutional government as practiced in England or France."<sup>3</sup> Wehler was also guilty of this mistake, portraying the German population as an inert mass that simply reacted to the initiatives of an authoritarian regime, a conception of Imperial German politics that more recent historical studies have shown to be seriously flawed, due to their failure to take into account the various legitimate channels (such as the Reichstag and public associations) by means of which public opinion could convert itself into an effective political force.

Chief among these more recent works is Geoff Eley's *Reshaping the German Right*. In this work, Eley shows that public opinion was a force that German rulers could not afford to ignore. Eley singles out nationalist and pro-colonial public associations (such as the Pan-German League and the Naval League) as some of the most effective popular political institutions, which managed, in spite of government ambivalence, to harness public opinion and to use it to

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<sup>2</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *Germany's First Bid for Colonies: A Move in Bismarck's Foreign Policy* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967). Hans Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871-1918* (Dover, NH: Berg Publishers, 1985). Wehler termed this strategy of distraction by means of colonial pursuit, "social imperialism."

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *Germany's First Bid for Colonies*, 5.

influence the German government on a number of issues, including colonial policy.<sup>4</sup> This implies that Imperial Germany's colonial decision making was determined to a large extent, not by the calculations of its rulers, but by the demands of significant portions of the German population. To better understand the nature of these demands we must examine the arguments that the various pro-colonial associations used to rally their members behind the cause of colonial expansion. This will shed light on an important and often overlooked determining factor of The German Empire's colonial policy.

An examination of the rhetoric of the pro-colonial associations reveals that arguments for colonial expansion tended to fall into one of two categories. Arguments in the first category based themselves on common economic principles, and maintained that a colonial empire would stabilize and grow the German economy. Arguments in the second category based themselves on an anti-modern, hyper-nationalist worldview that held racial purity and national expansion as its primary goals. I will call these two kinds of arguments economic and *völkisch*, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

The economic arguments for colonialism came to the fore when Germany plunged into an economic depression that lasted from 1873 to 1895. These arguments were founded upon a few simple economic assumptions. The first such assumption was that the depression was the result of a crisis of overproduction. According to this view, German industry had become so productive that its output was too great for domestic markets to absorb. This in turn led to falling profits for producers, decreased wages for workers, and a general slowing of the German economy. There was an obvious solution to this problem. Since it resulted from a lack of markets, it could be

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<sup>4</sup> Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: radical nationalism and political change after Bismarck*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980). The rabid nationalistic impulses that these associations helped instill in the populace and to direct toward concrete political objectives was often seen as deeply troubling by even the staunchly conservative aristocrats who managed Germany's foreign affairs. One high ranking official commented that these radicals did "more harm than good" (Eley, 73).

<sup>5</sup> I have borrowed the term "*völkisch*" from George Mosse. See his work *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964).

solved by acquiring new ones. These new markets, it was supposed, could be acquired in the form of economically dependent colonies. As an added bonus, such colonies would supply Germany with cheap raw materials, which it was otherwise forced to acquire through tariff-burdened international trade. From this perspective, a plantation-based colonial system was ideal. Under such a system a small number of German colonists would convince or compel the indigenous population of the colony to work on plantations, where they would grow crops for export in return for wages which they could use to purchase German manufactured goods.

Arguments of this type had been advanced as early as the 1840's, but it was not until several years of economic crisis had passed that they found an audience.<sup>6</sup> In 1879, When Friedrich Fabri advanced economic colonial arguments in a pamphlet titled *Does Germany Need Colonies*, it enjoyed immediate success, and marked the beginning of the “popular colonial movement” in Germany.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, the Colonial Society was founded and it quickly grew to become a major pro-colonial force. It based its advocacy on economic grounds, and attracted support not only from individuals, but from major manufacturing and shipping firms as well.<sup>8</sup>

Over time, this *markets and materials* argument became a mantra of the colonial movement. But as the empire expanded, the expected benefits did not materialize. In reaction to this economic disappointment, as well as to appalling reports of a genocidal war being waged against the Herero people of Southwest Africa, a parliamentary opposition to official colonial policy arose. A coalition led by the Social Democrats began blocking all funding for colonial projects. In debate, this coalition argued that the colonies had been an economic burden. In response to the suggestion that the colonies provided vital sources of raw materials, they pointed out that the

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<sup>6</sup> Woodruff D. Smith, “Ideology of German Colonialism,” *The Journal of Modern History* 46 (Dec., 1974): 644-645

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 651.

<sup>8</sup> Woodruff D. Smith, *The German Colonial Empire*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 3-20.

amount of goods imported from the colonies was “so small in comparison with the amount Germany imported from other countries as to not be worth the expense . . . .”<sup>9</sup> Elaborating on this point August Bebel, the leader of the Social Democratic party, claimed that “a glass of milk produced on an African farm is dearer than a glass of champagne for the German worker” and went on to note that the value of German trade with Denmark alone was more than three times greater than that of Germany’s total colonial trade.<sup>10</sup> It was in the midst of such criticism, immediately following the rejection of a supplementary bill for Southwest Africa, that the Chancellor, Bernhard von Bulow, interrupted the debate to announce the dissolution of parliament.<sup>11</sup> In the election that followed, the conservative, pro-colonial parties won a decisive victory, while the Social Democrats lost almost fifty percent of their seats.<sup>12</sup> The German public had made its preference clear: colonial empire was to be pursued in spite of the clear economic and humanitarian costs. Such an outcome was possible because many influential and politically involved Germans were convinced by a justification of colonialism that had nothing to do with economics and that considered the outrageous crimes committed in the German colonies to be a natural outcome of colonial expansion. This was the *völkisch* justification.

The *völkisch* arguments for colonialism are irrational and barbaric. The worldview upon which they are based is obscure and fantastical. According to this worldview, racial and spiritual purity are the highest goods, war is inevitable, and economics is an ignoble science. If we hope to understand the *völkisch* arguments themselves, we must first come to grips with the worldview upon which they are based.

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<sup>9</sup> M.E. Townsend, *The Rise and Fall of Germany’s Colonial Empire, 1884-1918* (New York: Fertig, 1966), 238.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 239.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 241.

<sup>12</sup> Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 365.

*Völkisch* thought gets its name from the fact that it considered the *Volk* (meaning race, or ethnicity) to be the fundamental political unit. Other political units, such as states and individuals, derive their significance only from the service that they render to a *Volk*. *Völkisch* thinkers understood world history as an endless struggle for existence between different racial groups. In this struggle, expansion was seen as the only way to ensure the future survival of a *Volk*, whereas stagnation was seen as the first sign of its eventual eradication.<sup>13</sup> As such, war was seen as a natural occurrence, while peace could never be more than a respite between new bouts of violence. *Völkisch* thinkers believed that each *Volk* possessed its own defining characteristics, which it acquired over centuries of existence under certain geographic and economic conditions. For instance, members of the German *Volk* were supposed to have derived their superior, spiritual qualities from years of communal living close to the earth, among the mist-shrouded northern forests.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, *völkisch* thinkers condemned modernity, which threatened to kill the German spirit by uprooting it from the soil, and throwing it an isolated urban existence.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this worldview had entrenched itself deeply enough to become a viable political force. From the unification of Germany onward, a continuous increase in the expression of *völkisch* sentiments can be charted. The frustrated academic Paul de Lagarde provides the clearest early example. In 1878, he published a series of essays in which he blamed modern society for bringing about the spiritual decay of the German *Volk*. He called for a new Germanic religion, demanded the German colonization of Eastern Europe, the deportation of non-Germans from colonized areas, and the establishment of a German

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<sup>13</sup> Roger Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League, 1886-1914* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1988), 77.

<sup>14</sup> Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 17

agricultural aristocracy in the newly acquired territories.<sup>15</sup> He also claimed that such expansion was the only way to save Germany from eventual defeat at the hands of its neighbors.<sup>16</sup> At the time of his writing, Lagarde's views were at the far fringe of the national political discourse, but *völkisch* enthusiasts of the next generation would see him as a prophet, and would transform his idiosyncratic vision into a political movement.<sup>17</sup>

The most important political manifestation of *völkisch* thought occurred in 1891 with the establishment of the Pan-German League. This explicitly *völkisch* organization dreamed of establishing Germany as a dominant world power, and saw colonial expansion as an essential part of this mission.<sup>18</sup> Its clear commitment to *völkisch* ideology can be seen in the opening lines of its constitution:

The Pan-German League strives for the stimulation of German national sentiment, especially the cultivation of racial and cultural solidarity of all portions of the German *Volk*.

This task implies Pan-German advocacy:

- For the preservation of the German ethnicity in Europe and overseas and the support of its endangered segments...
- For the combat of all powers that would hinder our national development.
- For an energetic pursuance of German political interests throughout the world, especially for the continuance of German colonialism until it yields practical results.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961). 68.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 67-68. These ideas regarding expansion as a means for racial survival would resonate with later *völkisch* thinkers, including the prominent pro-colonial publicist Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden, and would find their final articulation in the Idea of *Lebensraum* (living space) which was one of the justificatory principles behind the Nazi occupation of large portions of Eastern Europe. See Woodruff D. Smith, *The German Colonial Empire*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* 154, 269. P.G.J. Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria*, (John Wiley & Sons, 1964), 98-102.

<sup>18</sup> Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German*, 75-81.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Alfred Kruck, *Die Geschichte des Alldeutschen Verbandes 1890-1939* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1954), 10 f.



Though its membership peaked at around only around 20,000 members, this organization was able to exert a disproportionate degree of political influence because it attracted the support of many prominent industrialists and intellectuals, and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century its perspective had come to be seen as a respectable political stance.<sup>20</sup> The arguments for colonial expansion that this organization put forward circulated through government offices, and resonated in lecture halls throughout Germany.

The First major *völkisch* argument for colonialism was that the expansion of German world power was the only way to ensure Germany's future security. If the German empire did not continue to expand, *völkisch* ideologists claimed, it would only be a matter of time before jealous rivals banded together to dismantle it. We see an early example of such reasoning in Lagarde, who makes the case that Germany should expand eastward at the expense of an unindustrialized Russia, which would otherwise eventually, "hurl its inexhaustible manpower against its western neighbors."<sup>21</sup> This was written at a time when Russia was still allied to Germany. We see the same logic expressed repeatedly by the Pan-Germans, who were fond of pronouncing that, "Recent history means nothing other than the struggle of *everyone* against Germandom!"<sup>22</sup> As we have already noted, such assumptions of foreign antagonism were central to the *völkisch* perspective. When such antagonism is assumed, national expansion becomes the only logical strategy, even if this means the breakdown of diplomatic relations with ones neighbors. And by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this paranoid perspective had ceased to be a mere fringe view, and had, in fact, begun to manifest in the highest levels of German political discourse. Consider these words spoken by Chancellor Bülow in a speech made to parliament in 1899, in support of an expansion the German battle fleet:

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<sup>20</sup> Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, 366; Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 219.

<sup>21</sup> Stern, *Politics of Cultural Despair*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German*, 82.

To daydream on the sidelines while others take a slice of the pie – this we cannot and will not permit ... Many in the world today feel envy toward us .... We do not ever again want to be the slaves of humanity .... The means have not yet been devised to win the *struggle for survival* in this world without a strong navy and army. In the coming century the German people will be either a hammer or an anvil!<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, his prediction would come true, as Germany's aggressive expansion would proceed to turn imagined enemies into real ones.

The Other major *völkisch* argument was that Germany needed colonies to serve as bases for the resettlement of emigrants. The starting point of this argument was the observation that large numbers of emigrants had been leaving Germany since the rapid onset of industrialization in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For German liberals this emigration was not a problem. It was if anything, seen as a good thing, because it removed groups that might otherwise become revolutionary.<sup>24</sup> For Germans who viewed the world in *völkisch* terms, however, this emigration was a tragic process, by which the surplus of German vitality was siphoned off by other nations, and through which unfortunate Germans were being deprived of their racial birthright. Lagarde, again providing a noteworthy example of such thinking, saw America as a sort of witch's cauldron that "transmute[d] noble Germans into base Americans."<sup>25</sup> The establishment of colonial settlements was a commonly proposed solution to this problem. Not only would such colonies allow for emigrants to retain their precious German heritage, but they would also allow for the proliferation of traditional agricultural communities, which were supposed to be the source of German spiritual superiority. Rather than a plantation based system, advocates of

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<sup>23</sup> Buchners Kolleg Geschichte. *Das Kaiserreich 1871 bis 1918* (Bamberg: Buchners Verlag, 1987), 137 f.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *The German Colonial Empire*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Stern. *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, 68.

settler colonialism envisioned colonies of autonomous German villages, where the honest and pure German *Volk* could flourish once again.<sup>26</sup>

I have laid out for you two distinct colonial visions, one economic, the other *völkisch*. These two visions are derived from entirely distinct premises. However, they are not logically exclusive, and in some cases both kinds of arguments could be put forward by the same colonial advocate. A *völkisch* colonialist could easily see economic prosperity as the natural outcome of thriving settler colony, just as an economic colonialist could see the expansion of German trade as a means by which the threatened German nation could secure its future existence. Nevertheless, the two outlooks could conflict. For example, the plantation based system supported by economic colonialists was incompatible with the village-based system of the *völkisch* colonialists. These two colonial systems called for incompatible means of implementation. The plantation system required indigenous people that could be exploited, while the village system required only their land. In fact, according to the *völkisch* axiom that different peoples are constantly engaged in a struggle against one another, the elimination of the indigenous population of the colony could be seen as necessary. This could help to explain why the German electorate did not react more strongly in the 1907 election to the incoming reports of German atrocities being committed in southwest Africa, Germany's most important settler colony.

Official German colonial policy was influenced by both economic and *völkisch* arguments. The economic arguments were more prominent at the beginning of the colonial period, but had receded in importance before the *völkisch* arguments by the outbreak of the First World War. Chancellor Bismarck, de facto imperial ruler from 1871 to 1890, pursued a purely economic

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<sup>26</sup> Woodruff D. Smith, "Ideology of German Colonialism," 650.

colonial policy and held up the “classical trading colony” as his colonial ideal.<sup>27</sup> He refused to grant concessions to the pressure groups that advocated settlement colonialism, and his firmness eventually cost him the support of important sections of the colonial movement.<sup>28</sup> *Völkisch* elements played a larger role under Wilhelm II, who ruled from 1890 to 1918. During his reign, thousands of settlers were attracted to southwest Africa by the government’s provision of cheap land, building loans, and a racial monopoly on live stock.<sup>29</sup> Wilhelm was also less resolute than Bismarck in resisting the demands of *völkisch* pressure groups. For example, his decision to travel to Morocco in 1905 in order to prevent French annexation of this potential site for settler colonialism was carried out “largely to satisfy the popular clamor at home,” and in spite of his own better judgment.<sup>30</sup> The end result of this poorly advised visit was the formation of a military alliance between France and Britain, thus locking Germany into a desperate diplomatic situation.

I am not claiming that these arguments, *völkisch* or economic, were the sole determinants of German colonial policy. The nuanced deliberations of ministers and diplomats were also decisive factors. But if we consider these deliberations in isolation, as if they were not influenced in any way by public opinion, it becomes difficult to explain Germany’s erratic colonial course.

Once the popular arguments are included in our considerations, however, the task is made easier. The German government pursued a global colonial empire, even after this had proven to be economically fruitless and diplomatically costly, because important portions of the populace valued colonies for reasons that had nothing to do with economic or diplomatic considerations. Expansion, even at the risk of war, was urgently demanded by some of the most vocal and influential segments of the German population, because they considered alliances with other

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<sup>27</sup> Smith, *The German Colonial Empire*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 203.

<sup>30</sup> Townsend, *Rise and Fall*, 225.

nations to be inherently unstable, war to be natural, and expansion and domination to be the only means of security. The increasingly risky colonial policy of the German government must be understood, at least partially, as a concession to these demands.