

Bernhard Dernburg on his Impressions of German East Africa (1908)

Abstract

German colonial policy could rely on support from the broad majority in the German Reichstag; differences primarily concerned its execution. The left-liberal banker Bernhard Dernburg (1865–1937) headed the newly created Imperial Colonial Office [*Reichskolonialamt*] starting in 1907. After a trip through German East Africa, he related his impressions to the Reichstag Budget Committee on February 18, 1908. He wanted to exploit colonial resources—among which he counted native populations—to the maximum. In doing so, he did nothing conceal the asymmetrical relations of violence; on the contrary, “racial justice” seemed natural to him, although he did want to curb its excesses.

Source

Questions about Policies towards the Natives in German East Africa

State Secretary Bernhard Dernburg of the Imperial Colonial Office describes his

experiences during a 30-day journey through German East Africa to the Reichstag budget committee on February 18, 1908.

A large number of well-meaning individuals in the colonies, as well as here, believe that the colonization of Africa can be accomplished by administrative measures, and that we can alter the entire nature of these people within a short period of time by exerting pressure on the native population or enacting all manner of regulations. I cannot blame these gentlemen for wishing, from their perspective for such measures to be taken. After all, their concern, unlike that of the German Empire, is not to attain significant access to the active members of the nation in an organized manner. Rather, they are interested in making money in a relatively short space of time. They cannot exist out there for very long, and the more they earn the better. They also do not contribute to the burdens that the wars and uprisings cause us. On the other hand, the imperial administration—which has been tasked with developing these countries and promoting the exchange of those goods that are either produced or consumed in Germany—takes the position that it is, first and foremost, the custodian of the prevailing legal and political institutions in the colonies, that it will soon be compelled to ensure that the Empire’s financial sacrifices for the colonies will remain within reasonable bounds; thirdly, that it is the only authority thus far that is in a position to exercise the rights of the native population, which also exist after all. And if I have to take the position “No” or “Not yet” on some of the wishes and complaints that have reached me, this should not be taken to mean that I am unfriendly or negative or prejudiced, but rather that I cannot approve of the tempo at which we are trying to teach a population that has been in a different cultural state for thousands of years a different understanding of the law, of family relations and working methods. We must adopt a different approach, if we do not wish to call into question the fine results achieved by my predecessors and all German officials in the colonies through violent, unnatural and forced experiments. (Bravo!) [...]

I preface my remarks with the sentence also included in the petition of the farmers in East Africa, namely that the native is the most important asset in Africa. We now need to discover: What is the situation of the natives out there? Every activity by the White man naturally brings him into contact with the Black man. Only together with

him can he cultivate his land and only with him can he engage in trade. The colonization of East Africa would be utterly impossible without him. Just as the coexistence between Whites and Blacks can lead to flourishing only there, everywhere they come together bears the seeds of greater conflict, for relations between the government and the Blacks and between them and all the other estates: the farmers and planters, the merchants and even the missionaries.

The relationships of the White government to the Blacks under its protection and the degree of its influence depend strongly on local conditions. You know that we exercise virtually no power in the parts of the East African protectorate with the most people and probably also the most cattle, e.g., over the entire country of Ruanda and Urundi. These provinces are said to have approximately five million inhabitants and to be very wealthy. [...] The population of the protectorate is by no means evenly distributed. On the coast there is a mixture of all manner of Negroes, naturally without tribal membership and naturally also without the corresponding native authorities. Everywhere in the interior there have been military conflicts between Whites and Blacks, and the native sultans and chieftains have been removed and replaced by officials, some of them Black. In the West, the native sultans rule under German sovereignty; [...] What is to be done with the countries in East Africa that are still under the interim rule of these native sultans or village mayors? It would be difficult to change this, as it requires significant instruments of power. I do not believe I need to remind you that in East Africa, with a population of ten million, including more than three million men, we have just 4,000 Black soldiers and policemen and perhaps 120 or 150 German officers. We must — and this is the foundation of our power — hold everything in East Africa together by means of the reputation that the administration enjoys, the severity with which it proceeds against any insubordination, the technical help of the railroads which, as you know, are still incomplete, and the degree of trust it has among the Blacks. We must introduce and maintain a strong, just, trustworthy administration; above all we must convince the people that German rule affords them an advantage. It is very difficult to persuade them, if only because the advantages they have had thus far were very small in comparison to the disadvantages that they felt the German administration brought them with regard to the change in their customs, the payment of taxes, controls etc.

I hope that my remarks will convince the commission that the government can prosper only if it adopts a cautious, slow, what some call “Negro-friendly” and I call Negro-preserving policy, and that it does not permit itself to be diverted from this path by any interests or opinions. As it does at home, it must balance the interests of all occupations and professions and cannot take the side of one to the detriment of the other.

[...]

The main requirement, however, which is in the interest of Germany’s reputation and the peace and security of the protectorate, is to strengthen the Black population’s trust in the government. For that reason, I have devoted my attention principally to the administration of justice in the protectorate. It is in the nature of the Negroes that the existing racial justice cannot be changed in the near future and that certain means of punishment that evoke horror in our homeland cannot be abolished. I have explored especially in this direction. It is all the more important, though, to surround this legal situation with guarantees, which prevent an arbitrary and imprudent deployment of the means of punishment by those persons endowed with judicial powers. In an address I gave in Oldenburg I already discussed what happens in the Negro courts, and here I will only say that I found much positive law there, which contributes to the settlement of legal disputes and the punishment of breaches of law in the population. This is also recognizable in the attitude of the Blacks.

In disputes between Black and White, however, the position of the former is disadvantageous. If a White man

makes an allegation against a Black man, he writes a note and the matter is settled by a *shauri*. If a Black man makes a complaint against a White man, in contrast, he must go to court, and must pay a retainer; the usual formalities are imposed upon him as would be in Germany, and he at last receives a verdict or an enforceable title, which he has no idea what to do with, with ongoing dates and deadlines. (Amusement.) And you must remember that in the entire protectorate (which is twice as large as Germany) there are but three courts where Blacks can bring charges against Whites. [...]

On the coast, the many White men walking around with whips make an unpleasant impression. I found one lying on the table of the main cash office in Dar es Salaam (movement). It is still common even today, and those gentlemen who have been there will confirm this. Any White man has a certain right to beat his servants, workers etc. (shouting). They do not exercise it everywhere, as I can gladly confirm, but send their matters to court. [...]

Source: *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*, published by the Reichskolonialamt, vol. 19, no. 5, 1. III. 1908, pp. 217–22; reproduced in Gerhard A. Ritter, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch*. 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 348–51.

Available online at:

<http://daten.digitalesammlungen.de/0004/bsb00044645/images/index.html?id=00044645&groesser=&fip=193.174.98.30&no=&seite=348>

Translation: Pamela Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Bernhard Dernburg on his Impressions of German East Africa (1908), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-233>> [July 15, 2025].