

Letter by Wilhelm Solf to Ernst Schmidt-Dargitz (November 25, 1901)

Abstract

In 1900, German diplomat Wilhelm Solf (1862-1936) was appointed governor of the new colony German Samoa, which was considered a German “model colony” due to its non-violent colonization. The Samoans were part of the German colonial administrative apparatus but regulated their internal affairs completely independently. Also, the head tax, which was levied for the first time in 1901 (an unknown innovation for the Samoans) was completely used for the interests of the local population and was also administered by them. In a letter Solf formulated the core of his policy: “All radical means are bad; time and goodness and justice are the best means of government in Samoa.”

Source

[...]

I don't know if you got the impression from my very open letters that I am vain or conceited. Having examined myself, I find that these weaknesses do not occupy a significant space inside me. But when I look back now, after 3 difficult years, on what I found when the flag was hoisted and compare it with what has been achieved despite Rose Grunow and Emsie, I am filled with a holy anger against those who have attacked me so improperly in form and so unjustly in cause, resulting from a mixture of vanity and bitterness.

If my deputy and my potential successors continue what I have started – the core will always be the administration of the natives – then I really believe that while Samoa may not be a very rich colony, it will be the only one of ours that can maintain itself in a short time. It will take years of work to get the natives fully in shape. The central government in Mulinuu must stop; the post of Alii Sili must be abolished; the post of Chief Justice must also stop; interest in the Itu-o-malo must give way to interest in the nuu. The governor must keep in touch with the Samoans at all times and must by no means declare the title disputes, which seem so foolish to us, to be nonsense. All the radical remedies once jokingly proposed to you are bad. Time and goodness and justice are the best means of government in Samoa. It is easy to feel hindered by some of the Samoan character traits, yet on the whole the Samoans are a people who are worthy of our interest and affection. The more you get into the minds of the people, the more charming qualities you will find, the more you will be able to counter the tendency to intrigue and direct, even unnecessary lies. In Savaii, my favorite place while I stayed there, the Samoans are sometimes almost delightful in their nature and on all the islands, they stand out from the foreign settlers in the exercise of social forms.

Even the foreigners here when you look at them calmly are only half as bad as you might be inclined to think in your initial grudge about the inevitable machinations of the South Sea pioneers. After all, I got along with everyone, even the scoundrel Moors.

It was difficult, very difficult to get along with the company. I managed to avoid all friction, because on a purely personal level, I seem to have an influence, sometimes almost suggestive, on the somewhat soft and not very independent Riedel. By the way, Riedel is a quite sociable and presentable person. I am glad that I have brought him back into honor with the navy.

The most difficult part was [dealing with] the Navy. I predict, with all my heart, that the Navy will play another trick on the foreign office that will give little pleasure to secretaries and chancellors. At the moment, there is a fruitful relationship with the Cormorant in every respect. And yet, how often must one say to oneself, the wise man knows when to let go. Strangely enough, despite all the inconveniences designed to destroy me completely that the good Emsmann has caused me and which, the memory of the man is not unpleasant to me. I believe we will be quite chummy in Berlin.

[...]

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