

The Radicals, The Revisionists, and the SPD:

How German Socialists Made Sense of Colonialism, 1890-1914

By Isaac Scott

In the early 20th century, some Germans dissented from the nation's quest of colonialism and imperialism. As Germany pressed onwards in building its overseas empire, socialists and workers were forced more and more to come to terms with what it meant. Some saw colonial expansion as a ridiculous mission that would be paid with exorbitant sums of blood and gold. Others envisioned a socialist future with its own "enlightened" colonialism that would be informed by a new and far nobler proletarian culture. This resistance was largely centered in members of the socialist left, some of whom would lambast colonial policy for having senselessly mowed down people in the name of capital.¹ What was the socialist reaction to German colonialism? Why did socialists react the way they did? To answer these questions, one must look at how socialists at the time understood imperialism, how they evaluated it, and how they condemned or justified it.

To begin, this essay will discuss contemporary German politics, illustrating how historical tendencies endure even in a modern context. The following section will summarize the historiography regarding the topic. To explore the intellectual landscape of German socialism, the essay then examines three representative figures: August Bebel, Rosa Luxemburg, and Eduard Bernstein. Each of these figures viewed colonialism in a distinct way. They each occupy a different point on the spectrum of pro-colonial to anti-colonial, with Luxemburg being the most radically anti-colonial, Bernstein being the most pro-colonial, and Bebel occupying the space

¹ Rosa Luxemburg, "The Crisis of German Social Democracy (1916)," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, trans. Socialist Publication Society (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 339.

between. Colonialist thinking was prolific in Germany, but some socialists resisted those narratives and articulated different visions of Germany's future. By looking at how people criticized or supported colonialism we can better understand colonial ideology.

The legacy of early 20th century German socialists is continuously unfolding and plays an important role in shaping German politics today. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) remains influential, being the leading party of the current governing coalition.² Questions about foreign policy remain vital for the SPD and Germany more broadly. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Social Democrats are overseeing a "turning point" wherein both military spending and approval are on the rise.³ The SPD is no longer the home of the German radical left, it occupies a space much closer to the center. In the current left-wing of German politics though, there has been a disruption.

Debates surrounding migration have been central to German politics for several years. The 2015 Migration Crisis, largely fuelled by the civil war in Syria, is one notable example.⁴ During the 2015 Crisis, Germany was credited for its "open door policy" and its welcoming of migrants/asylum seekers.⁵ Today, Germany is in the midst of another migration crisis. There was a surge in immigration resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, at a time when

² Geir Moulson, "Scholz Replaces Merkel as German Chancellor, Opening New Era," *Associated Press*, December 8, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/climate-elections-europe-angela-merkel-european-union-675ee26e99ce6e7f57d0f61989b05a16>.

³ Emily Schultheis, "Germany's Move to Help Arm Ukraine Signals Historic Shift," *Associated Press*, February 27, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-europe-olaf-scholz-nato1f1a27b1b0e4aab79bdb4e5a7de07eb4>; Moulson, "Germany's Military 'Turning Point' Still a Work in Progress," *Associated Press*, February 22, 2023,

⁴ Matthew Karnitschnig, "Germany's Never-Ending Migration Crisis," *Politico*, November 9, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germanys-never-ending-migration-crisis/>.

⁵ Sarah Marsh and Riham Alkousaa, "Once Welcoming Germany Talks Tougher on Asylum Ahead of Elections," *Reuters*, October 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/once-welcoming-germany-talks-tougher-asylum-ahead-elections-2023-10-06/>.

Germany was itself struggling with energy troubles and economic woes.⁶ The bulk of the immigrants are from Ukraine, with Germany receiving over a million Ukrainians fleeing the war.⁷ Excluding those from Ukraine, the majority of Asylum seekers hail from Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran.⁸ The fact that many of these people are from “formerly” colonized places is hard to ignore. Colonialism is not responsible for all of the reasons people are fleeing their homes, but the enduring effects of European colonization exist nonetheless. The current migration situation has given right-wing factions fertile soil to grow their ranks. Over 70 percent of Germans are unhappy with how the government has been handling migration.⁹ Everything to the right of the centre-left (represented by the SPD) is associated with a growing skepticism of immigration in general.¹⁰ This sentiment has even been growing within left-wing parties like the Greens. It is not exactly a surprise then that the migration crisis has become a rallying point for the right, with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) more popular now than ever.¹¹

The ongoing migration saga has contributed to the factionalism so ever-present in the history of the German left, which remains a decisive factor in German politics. Recently, a prominent figure in the far-left has taken steps towards the creation of a new party. This alliance is headed by Sahra Wagenknecht and seeks to distinguish itself by its left-wing economics combined with right-wing stances on key social issues. Primarily by a more restrictive stance on migration, but also a more conservative stance on issues of gender.¹² Restricting migration is

⁶ Marsh and Alkousaa.

⁷ N.A. “Germany: Scholz Says Refugee Number ‘Too High at the Moment,’” *Deutsche Welle*, November 30, 2023.

⁸ N.A. “Demographics of Asylum Seekers in Germany,” *Bundeszentrale Für Politische Bildung*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/migration-integration/zahlen-zu-asyl/265710/demografie-von-asylsuchenden-in-deutschland/>.

⁹ Karnitschnig, “Germany’s Never-Ending Migration Crisis.”

¹⁰ Sabine Kinhardt, “Germany: Growing Dissatisfaction with Migration Policy,” *Deutsche Welle*, September 29, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-growing-dissatisfaction-with-migration-policy/a-66961728>.

¹¹ Karnitschnig, “Germany’s Never-Ending Migration Crisis.”

¹² Ben Knight, “Germany’s New Far Left Party Could Challenge Far-Right AfD,” *Deutsche Welle*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-new-far-left-party-could-challenge-far-right-afd/a-66470345>.

typically associated with the German right-wing, and parties like the Alternative for AfD. This seems to be part of the plan, as Sahra Wagenknecht has specifically referred to AfD voters as the target demographic for her new alliance, describing them as disillusioned people who vote for the right out of desperation.¹³ While the political context is different, this is reminiscent of previous moments where German members of the far-left adopted right-wing positions. In the past, there are examples like supporting Germany's colonial endeavors and imperial ambitions or a pro-War stance in the First World War. What will come of this is unknown, but it has potential to seriously impact the German political landscape. This exodus of the Left Party, led by Wagenknecht, has put the parent party at risk and seeking a new direction.¹⁴

Sahra Wagenknecht is a "right-wing socialist." This comes through in an array of socially conservative views that she has expressed, from the anti-immigration stance already discussed, to refusing to be vaccinated, to being against multiculturalism. She has also shown hostility to "green policies", she is "anti-woke" and she shows "passionate support for Putin's Russia".¹⁵ Some have identified this economically left and culturally right phenomenon as a reaction generated by social and economic liberalism,¹⁶ however it is revealed in the history of German socialism this is by no means a new thing. The difficulty people have with making sense of "right-wing socialists" or similar ideological chimeras is surprising when one considers just how long this phenomenon has existed. Even if the SPD of today is vastly different from the SPD of the Wilhelmine era, it did not appear from nothingness out of the murky waters of the

¹³ Knight; Geir Moulson, "Prominent German Leftist to Launch a New Party That Could Eat into Far-Right's Support," *Associated Press*, October 23, 2023,

¹⁴ Marcel Fürstenau, "Germany's Socialist Party Fights for Survival," *Deutsche Welle*, November 20, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-socialist-left-party-fights-for-survival/a-67465078>.

¹⁵ Daniel Johnson, "Socialist Nationalism Is on the Rise in Germany," *The Telegraph*, November 19, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/19/socialist-nationalism-is-on-the-rise-in-germany/>.

¹⁶ Jeremy Cliffe, "Sahra Wagenknecht's New Left Conservatism," *The New Statesman*, November 1, 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2023/11/sahra-wagenknecht-germany-new-left-conservatism>.

Second World War. It is not independent of its history. By critically examining the intellectual and political history of Germany, this essay will provide some understanding as to how and why otherwise progressive figures/organizations may adopt reactionary positions on certain issues.

The historiography regarding German socialism and colonialism is developing, but scholars are only beginning to uncover the threads woven between socialism and colonialism in German history.¹⁷ There have been political biographies written about the key figures, the 1907 election is somewhat well covered, and there has been lots of good work put into how people in Germany viewed colonialism. There have been multiple monographs published that look at German politics and the social democrats, such as Stefan Berger's *Social Democracy and the Working Class*, which surveys German social democracy from its formative years through the 19th century and up to the 1990s.¹⁸ There have been a few political biographies published regarding the central figures of this essay. Luxemburg, Bernstein, and Bebel all had political biographies published in the 1980s and 1990s. Luxemburg was discussed in Richard Abraham's *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life for the International* in 1989.¹⁹ Bernstein and evolutionary socialism was covered in Manfred B. Steger's *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism*, which was published in 1997.²⁰ William Harvey Maehl published *August Bebel: Shadow Emperor of the German Workers* in 1980.²¹

¹⁷ The matter of language should be noted. Some aspects of this subject may be more thoroughly covered in German literature, but this essay will only be engaging with what has been published in English.

¹⁸ Stefan Berger, *Social Democracy and the Working Class: In Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany* (New York: Longman, 2000).

¹⁹ Richard Abraham, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life for the International* (New York: Berg, 1989).

²⁰ Manfred B. Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²¹ William Harvey Maehl, *August Bebel: Shadow Emperor of the German Workers* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1980).

According to Brett Fairbairn, the only Wilhelmine elections that have received much scholarly attention were the 1907 and 1912 elections.²² In terms of English language monographs, there is George Dunlap Crothers' *The German Elections of 1907*. While having a monograph discussing the election at length is of great help, it comes with the drawback of age. *The German Elections of 1907* was originally published in 1941 but received a reprint in 1968.²³ Crothers argued that the significance of the 1907 Elections came from the fact that they were an important step in the development of nationalistic sentiments in Germany leading up to the First World War.²⁴ However, there has been more recent scholarly work on the elections beginning in the 1990s and into the present. Take for example, Helmut Walser Smith's chapter in the *Imperialist Imagination*. In 1998's "The Talk of Genocide, the Rhetoric of Miscegenation: Notes on Debates in the German Reichstag Concerning Southwest Africa, 1904-14", Smith uses the 1907 Elections to show that racial thinking was wide in scope and stretched across the political spectrum.²⁵

German colonialism has definitely been the subject of plenty of scholarly work. Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley edited an invaluable book, *German Colonialism in a Global Age* in which John Philip Short argues that the 1907 Elections displayed a broad working class anti-colonialism.²⁶ Scholars have rightly focused on how the German metropole affected the colonies, and the devastating realities of German colonial rule. However, the impact of events in

²² Brett Fairbairn, "Interpreting Wilhelmine Elections," in *Elections, Mass Politics, and Social Change in Modern Germany*, ed. Hartmut Lehmann, 1992, 19.

²³ George Dunlap Crothers, *The German Elections of 1907*, 2nd Edition (New York: AMS Press, 1968).

²⁴ Crothers, 239.

²⁵ Helmut Walser Smith, "The Talk of Genocide, the Rhetoric of Miscegenation: Notes on Debates in the German Reichstag Concerning Southwest Africa, 1904-14," in *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy*, ed. Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 109.

²⁶ John Phillip Short, "Colonialism, War, and the Working Class: Popular Mobilization in the 1907 Reichstag Elections," in *German Colonialism in a Global Age*, ed. Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 210–27.

the colonies on the metropole have often been overlooked.²⁷ An understanding of the close relationship between liberal nationalism and Germany's aggressive imperialism has also emerged within the literature.²⁸ What the historiography has neglected thus far is bringing together all of these elements into a unified analysis of German socialists and colonialism.

In the nineteenth century SPD, Rosa Luxemburg was the most emphatic and uncompromising critic of colonialism. Luxemburg was born in 1871, and killed in 1919.²⁹ She was born to a Jewish family in Poland, where she became engaged in Marxism as a teenager until being forced to flee the country because of state forces cracking down on the organization she was a part of.³⁰ After settling in Germany, she was almost immediately engaged in debates within the SPD around "revisionism" and would go on to participate in the 1905 Russian Revolution.³¹ She remains one of the most well-known theorists in Marxist history. Ultimately, her disagreements with the SPD "revisionists" would reach a breaking point in the First World War and the German Revolution, where she and other members of the radical wing would split with the SPD.³² She is often recalled today for her disagreements with Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks.³³

She consistently and strongly condemned colonialism on a fundamental level. Going past a mere critique of its harshness, Luxemburg called into question the premise that European civilization was at all better than those it oppressed. It was her rejection of European superiority that set her apart from her socialist peers. She argued that to socialists, colonized peoples were

²⁷ Erik Grimmer-Solem, "The Professors' Africa: Economists, the Elections of 1907, and the Legitimation of German Imperialism," *German History* 25, no. 3 (2007): 316.

²⁸ Grimmer-Solem, 316–17.

²⁹ Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, "Introduction," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 8; Hudis and Anderson, 29.

³⁰ Hudis and Anderson, "Introduction," 8.

³¹ Hudis and Anderson, 9; Hudis and Anderson, 12.

³² Hudis and Anderson, "Introduction," 26.

³³ Abraham, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 10–11.

just as human as any other.³⁴ One of her more famous quotes displays her international solidarity, “the Negroes in Africa with whose bodies the Europeans play a game of catch, are just as near to me” as the suffering of the Jews.³⁵ This led her to mock the “civilized world” that had doomed “tens of thousands of Hereros to destruction.”³⁶ After a tragic volcano eruption at the port town of St. Pierre on the island of Martinique, Luxemburg wrote a biting article criticizing European nations for only finding humanity in the island after thousands died. For example, she attacked France for weeping over the people in Martinique when its cannons “spewed out death and annihilation” of equal measure in Africa.³⁷

Eduard Bernstein was a socialist who admired moderation, unfortunately though, this moderation misled him into compromising on his previous anti-colonialism, becoming one of the SPD’s more positive voices on colonialism. Born in 1850, Bernstein would live until 1932.³⁸ A party man through and through, he was present from the very founding of the SPD and would remain with it until his death, even being re-elected to the Reichstag from 1920-1928, only four years before his death.³⁹ In the late 19th century Bernstein was a leading figure in Marxism, even being designated by Friedrich Engels as his literary executor and was Engel’s heir apparent.⁴⁰ However, in 1896-1898 Bernstein would publish a series of articles that argued many of Marx’s central theses were outdated.⁴¹ Being the “father of Marxist revisionism”, he developed a theory called “evolutionary socialism” that sought to synthesize liberalism and socialism.⁴² It should be

³⁴ Luxemburg, “The Crisis of German Social Democracy (1916),” 325.

³⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, “To Emanuel and Mathilde Wurm (1917),” in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 390.

³⁶ Luxemburg, “The Crisis of German Social Democracy (1916),” 339.

³⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, “Martinique (1902),” in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, trans. David Wolff (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 124.

³⁸ Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy*, 21; Steger, 247.

³⁹ Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy*, 245.

⁴⁰ Steger, 71; Steger, 4.

⁴¹ Hudis and Anderson, “Introduction,” 9.

⁴² Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy*, 147.

noted that the Bernstein being examined here is the later Bernstein, after his break with orthodox Marxism in the late 1890s. He would go on to oppose the First World War and would see the SPD move even to his right.⁴³ As it stands, few figures in the history of socialist thought have received as much criticism as Bernstein, who in his own time was often marginalized for being too right for many socialists and too left for many liberals.⁴⁴

Bernstein's views on colonialism were informed by his "Anglophilia" and his cultural Darwinist views.⁴⁵ He picked up his Anglophilia while exiled in London, where he became sympathetic to the idea of a "liberal imperialism" and that the formation of self governing White colonies could expand democratization in the home country.⁴⁶ Wowed by the performance and efficiency of British colonialism, Bernstein began to distinguish between different types of imperialism, arguing that there were more "benign" forms that could have positive impacts. In his attempt to define "appropriate forms of socialist colonialism" he would employ cultural evolutionary arguments.⁴⁷ While in England, Bernstein got into a spat with the British Marxist Belfort Bax in the late 1890s. Bax endorsed indigenous peoples' rights to maintain their traditional folkways and cultural expression. In his critique of Bax, Bernstein compared it to Rousseau's naïve notion of the "noble savage" and celebrated the "civilizing effects" of colonial expansion.⁴⁸ By 1899, in his treatise *The Immediate Tasks of Social Democracy*, Bernstein argued that social democrats have an interest in the international prestige of the German nation, "it cannot be a matter of indifference to Social Democracy whether the German nation – which

⁴³ Steger, 220.

⁴⁴ Steger, 4.

⁴⁵ Richard B Day and Daniel Gaido, *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War I*, ed. Richard B Day and Daniel Gaido, vol. 33, Historical Materialism Book Series (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 213. Anglophilia in this case refers to an admiration of British thought, philosophical tradition, and politics, as well as an apparent respect for its imperial administration.

⁴⁶ Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy*, 206.

⁴⁷ Steger, 206.

⁴⁸ Steger, 206.

has, after all, contributed and contributes its proper share to the civilizing labor of the nations – is eclipsed in the council of nations.”⁴⁹ Bernstein’s views on nationalism and colonialism were also informed by a transformation of the “white man’s burden” into the “burden of the proletariat.” He saw workers as having a nobler form of patriotism and thought that the proletarian culture would have a responsibility to uplift less developed cultures.⁵⁰

There were of course many socialists who occupied a space between Bernstein’s advocacy of “benign” colonialism and Luxemburg’s uncompromising anti-colonialism. August Bebel is an excellent example of this thinking. While he is not the most famous German socialist, he was indispensable in making the SPD what it was in its heyday. Bebel was born in 1840, and died shortly before the First World War, in 1913.⁵¹ His origins were humble, by age 13 he had lost both of his parents and most of his family and would go on to become a journeyman carpenter.⁵² Friedrich Naumann described him as such: “For he was flesh of the flesh and bone of the bone of the common people . . . The grandeur of German Social Democracy rests in part upon the limitless trust that the masses reposed in their ‘August’.”⁵³ However, despite his unassuming origins, Bebel would emerge to lead the SPD and oversee its growth into Europe-wide recognition.⁵⁴ His thinking was inspired by Lasalle and Marx.⁵⁵

In many cases Bebel acted as Germany’s conscience in colonial matters. One example of this was his condemnation of Germany’s involvement in the Boxer Rebellion in China. Calling into question Germany’s motives, he described the affair as, “a very ordinary war of conquest . . .

⁴⁹ Eduard Bernstein, “The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy [Die Voraussetzungen Des Sozialismus Und Die Aufgaben Der Sozialdemokratie],” trans. Thomas Dunlap (*German History in Documents and Images*). https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=767

⁵⁰ Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy*, 205.

⁵¹ Maehl, *August Bebel: Shadow Emperor of the German Workers*, 8; Maehl, 2.

⁵² Maehl, *August Bebel: Shadow Emperor of the German Workers*, 11–12.

⁵³ Maehl, 7.

⁵⁴ Maehl, *August Bebel: Shadow Emperor of the German Workers*. x

⁵⁵ Maehl, 81.

A campaign of revenge as barbaric as has never been seen in the last centuries, and not often at all in history; ... not even with the Huns, not even with the Vandals ... That is no match for what the German and other troops of the foreign powers, together with the Japanese troops, have done in China.”⁵⁶ Bebel argued for universal human rights and against inhumane treatment.⁵⁷ In 1906 he mocked the discussion surrounding “race-mixing”.⁵⁸ Bebel was criticized in the Reichstag in 1907 for his “backward” ideas about the colonies and his undermining of racist ideology.⁵⁹ Often times, Bebel’s critiques of imperialism would also revolve around the costs of colonialism or other practical concerns. He saw colonial expansion as a way to distract from the need to reform and as a way to extend capitalism’s lifespan.⁶⁰ In response to a bill subsidizing steamships, Bebel lamented that the masses would be made to pay for the majority of it.⁶¹

While Bebel was an outspoken critic of Germany’s colonial policies, on other occasions though, he made more ambiguous or pro-colonial remarks. In one case Bebel conceded that the Nama and Herero people were valid targets of “cultural raising.”⁶² Additionally, there are statements from Bebel that contradict many of his critiques. In one case he claimed that if the government was willing to spend the money, German Southwest Africa could be a “paradise.”⁶³ This is especially strange when Bebel on many other occasions criticized the German colonies as overly expensive. In an ambiguous remark, Bebel claimed that repeating the harsh measures imposed on the Herrero would be throwing a stick “between the legs of German colonial

⁵⁶ Bebel, August (1900), As cited in *The Kaiser: New Research on Wilhelm II’s Role in Imperial Germany*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 97.

⁵⁷ Smith, “The Talk of Genocide, the Rhetoric of Miscegenation: Notes on Debates in the German Reichstag Concerning Southwest Africa, 1904-14,” 122.

⁵⁸ Smith, 118.

⁵⁹ Smith, 122.

⁶⁰ Maehl, *August Bebel: Shadow Emperor of the German Workers*, 289.

⁶¹ Maehl, 194.

⁶² Smith, “The Talk of Genocide, the Rhetoric of Miscegenation: Notes on Debates in the German Reichstag Concerning Southwest Africa, 1904-14,” 110–11; Cultural raising refers to a paternalistic impulse by colonialists to “educate” the colonized people and raise them up to a supposedly “superior” culture.

⁶³ Maehl, *August Bebel: Shadow Emperor of the German Workers*, 421.

policy.”⁶⁴ Whether this statement is critical of colonialism is not entirely clear. Bebel was criticizing the harsh measures for hindering colonial policy, which may mean he saw it as desirable for colonial policy to run smoothly, but he may have just meant that harsh measures are ineffective in addition to inhumane.

Particular strands of colonialist thinking were more prevalent within the socialist sphere than others. This indicates that some aspects of colonialist thinking may have been more compelling to socialists than others. While explicit racial ideology was not as prominent amongst socialists, the idea that European culture and civilization was superior was much more readily accepted. This suggests that the most compelling element of colonialist thought to many socialists was the notion that European culture was at a higher stage of development than that of colonized peoples. From that standpoint it would have been much easier to accept the premise that European nations could or even should “civilize” the rest of the world. In part, this could be because socialism did not spring forth independently of other philosophical traditions. Colonialism, liberalism, and certain socialist ideologies all pull from the same European cultural tradition.

The 1907 Elections were a dramatic affair that brought colonialism to the forefront of German politics. An important piece of context for these elections was the situation in German Southwest Africa (now Namibia). The election came on the heels of war between the German colonial army and the Herero and Nama peoples, who had risen up against their colonial oppressors. The conflict would last from 1904-1907. Germany suffered casualties (676 dead, 907 wounded, 97 missing), but its losses would pale in comparison to the roughly 70 000

⁶⁴ Maehl, 421.

indigenous lives lost to battle, starvation, and thirst.⁶⁵ The elections came after Chancellor Bülow dissolved the Reichstag in December of 1906. This was done after the Center Party and the SPD refused a request for funding an expedition in German Southwest Africa.⁶⁶ The Reichstag debate in late 1906 that led to the dissolution was concerned with funding the military suppression of the Herrero and Nama peoples. Those supportive of the colonial administration argued that to retreat would be traitorous to the soldiers sacrificing their lives for the nation. Those critical of the budget saw it as excessive and as proof that conciliation had not actually been attempted.⁶⁷ These debates were effectively a prelude to the election campaigns that would follow.

Unlike a typical Wilhelmine election that focused on issues like suffrage and taxes, the 1907 Elections would be about national honour, loyalty, and colonialism.⁶⁸ The Reichstag debates surrounding military funding and the parliamentary powers quickly expanded into broader debates around German colonialism and imperialism.⁶⁹ The 1907 Election was what Brett Fairbairn described as a “national” election, wherein the government set the tone with a patriotic or nationalistic appeal.⁷⁰ Those within the wing of enthusiastic colonialists framed the election as an appeal to patriotism, racism, and sought to stoke fears of socialism.⁷¹ The SPD eagerly went on the offensive against the “capitalistic *Weltpolitik*” (i.e. imperialism).⁷² The working class were important targets for this election. The right-wing attempted to draw working class Germans away from the SPD by drumming up patriotic sentiments, positioning the

⁶⁵ Smith, “The Talk of Genocide, the Rhetoric of Miscegenation: Notes on Debates in the German Reichstag Concerning Southwest Africa, 1904-14,” 109–10.

⁶⁶ Short, “Colonialism, War, and the Working Class: Popular Mobilization in the 1907 Reichstag Elections,” 213.

⁶⁷ Crothers, *The German Elections of 1907*, 75.

⁶⁸ Short, “Colonialism, War, and the Working Class: Popular Mobilization in the 1907 Reichstag Elections,” 213–14.

⁶⁹ Crothers, *The German Elections of 1907*, 103.

⁷⁰ Fairbairn, “Interpreting Wilhelmine Elections,” 23.

⁷¹ Short, “Colonialism, War, and the Working Class: Popular Mobilization in the 1907 Reichstag Elections,” 214.

⁷² Crothers, *The German Elections of 1907*, 152.

SPD and the Center as being in league with Germany's African enemies.⁷³ The "Hottentot" Elections of 1907 were described by Erik Grimmer-Solem as "nothing less than a national referendum on the entire German colonial endeavour."⁷⁴

Pro-colonial and anti-colonial blocks formed as an array of political parties and interest groups entered into a "national" alliance against the "international" block of the Catholic Centre and the SPD.⁷⁵ The anti-colonial block was depicted as hampering Germany's ability to shoulder its colonial burdens or fulfill its destiny as an empire, thus sacrificing Germany's prestige in the name of humanitarian hang-ups and parliamentary principles.⁷⁶ The SPD's moral condemnations and practical critiques were reduced to small nitpicks, regrettable necessities of the "civilizing" mission. While they also campaigned on fairly standard issues like rising meat prices, the SPD outflanked the Catholic Center in attacking colonial policy. Stressing as it had for years that the colonies cost hundreds of millions, putting Germany into greater debt to bankroll atrocities abroad.⁷⁷ Widespread nationalism, racism, and anti-socialism amongst the German population was an integral part of the elections. An authoritarian thinking that had permeated throughout portions of German society ingratiated many to the government's position.⁷⁸ The SPD had already been working for years to build a broad anti-imperialist movement.⁷⁹ Revisionist elements within the SPD had been moving away from the party's committed anti-colonialism, but in 1907 the rank-and-file politics of the SPD was distinctly critical of colonialism.⁸⁰

⁷³ Short, "Colonialism, War, and the Working Class: Popular Mobilization in the 1907 Reichstag Elections," 214.

⁷⁴ Grimmer-Solem, "The Professors' Africa," 322.

⁷⁵ Matthias Häußler, "'Die Kommandogewalt Hat Geredet, Der Reichstag Hat Zu Schweigen.' How the 'Hottentottenwahlen' of 1907 Shaped the Relationship between Parliament and Military Policy in Imperial Germany," *Journal of Namibian Studies* 15 (2014): 16.

⁷⁶ Grimmer-Solem, "The Professors' Africa," 336.

⁷⁷ Häußler, "'Die Kommandogewalt Hat Geredet, Der Reichstag Hat Zu Schweigen.,"" 16.

⁷⁸ Häußler, 19–20.

⁷⁹ Short, "Colonialism, War, and the Working Class: Popular Mobilization in the 1907 Reichstag Elections," 214.

⁸⁰ Short, 222.

With an 84.7% turnout the 1907 Elections had the greatest participation since the advent of German national elections.⁸¹ The SPD actually received a quarter million more votes in 1907 than it had in the previous election in 1903.⁸² This however did not prevent a drastic fall from 81 seats in the Reichstag to only 43.⁸³ Spectators outside of Germany took the outcome as a statement of support for German imperialism and its colonial ambitions.⁸⁴ What these elections show is the relationship between the SPD's anti-colonialism and the working class. It is clear that the party's critique of colonialism was not unique to higher-ups like Bebel, or writers like Luxemburg, but that it had also reached the rank-and-file. While social democratic workers displayed a critical attitude towards colonialism, not all workers were social democrats. In the wake of the 1907 Elections the SPD's criticism of colonialism became more subdued but did not disappear. This change in direction has often been attributed to the SPD's defeat in 1907.⁸⁵

German socialists of the Wilhelmine period rejected and supported colonialism for various reasons. Some criticized colonialism for economic reasons, seeing them as an unreasonable expense that the working class would be forced to pay for. Others condemned colonialism on moral grounds, seeing it as an abhorrent practice. Simultaneously though, there were socialists who supported colonialism to varying degrees. What this shows, along with the modern example of Wagenknecht, is the great variety of ways that people engage with issues, even if they seemingly occupy the same political sphere. It also illustrates how reactionary ideas are often pernicious and find their way into unexpected circles. This observation, while not groundbreaking, is crucial to making sense of the historical role that the social democrats played. To simply portray the SPD as the German home of anti-colonialism would wash away the

⁸¹ Häußler, “Die Kommandogewalt Hat Geredet, Der Reichstag Hat Zu Schweigen.,” 9–10.

⁸² Short, “Colonialism, War, and the Working Class: Popular Mobilization in the 1907 Reichstag Elections,” 220.

⁸³ Short, 226.

⁸⁴ Häußler, “Die Kommandogewalt Hat Geredet, Der Reichstag Hat Zu Schweigen.,” 20.

⁸⁵ Crothers, *The German Elections of 1907*, 215.

historical reality that there were plenty of socialists who ascribed to racist misconceptions or colonialist narratives. Going even beyond that, it erases the presence of open socialist colonialists.

By studying how various people understood, supported, or condemned colonialism, one can better understand both the ideology of colonialism itself, but also the ideologies of those who supported or condemned it. It is important to bring attention to the historical figures who resisted colonialism because it shows that colonial atrocities were not a forgone conclusion. When faced with uncomfortable realities about people of the past, some reflexively argue that “they were just a product of their time.” This research addresses that argument. It is true that people are small in the grand march of history, and that society-wide narratives are hard to escape. However, acknowledging this fact does not mean that historical figures should have their hands washed clean, and their agency erased. Colonialist thinking permeated even the German stronghold of anti-colonialism, but then there is Rosa Luxemburg. It is true people must be viewed in the context of their time, but nonetheless people have always been able to challenge the dominant structures of their time. Another German socialist perhaps put it better when saying that people “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 300.

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