

# All Humans Are Born Equal

**The early German socialists fought for the persecuted at home and abroad — convinced that the liberation of workers in Germany was linked to the liberation of oppressed peoples around the globe.**



The stage of the 1904 Second International Conference in Amsterdam.

In 1903, on the verge of what most historians would later identify as the twentieth century's first genocide, German Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader August Bebel rose before parliament to condemn the "war of suppression" his country's forces were waging against the Herero and Nama peoples in southwest Africa. Bebel was one of just two Reichstag members to dissent from the slaughter (the other was also an SPD parliamentarian).

During an earlier wave of executions of African natives, the Social Democratic newspaper *Vorwärts* vehemently criticized the German colonial commissioner, describing him as "an enraged Aryan who wishes to destroy all Jews, but, for a lack of Jews over there in Africa, shoots Negroes dead like sparrows and hangs negro girls for his own pleasure after they have satisfied his desire."

Such acts of opposition were not exceptional for German socialists in the hostile atmosphere of the Kaiser's Germany. The Social Democrats were everywhere the first, and most often the only, to take the side of the persecuted and oppressed. Not content to struggle for the rights of workers domestically, they spoke out against colonialism, discrimination, and national suppression abroad.

Their internationalism sprang from the conviction that the liberation of workers in Germany was linked — both morally and practically — to the liberation of oppressed

peoples and nationalities outside their borders. Perhaps it was Karl Kautsky, the so-called Pope of Marxism who put it most aptly: “All humans are born equal and are together one noble race.” And just like the oppressed workers of Europe, Kautsky optimistically declared, the colonized would emerge triumphant: “Not only the victory of the proletariat of the white races, but also the liberation of the ‘coloured’ races is only a question of time.”

## **Socialism of Fools**

Germany was a relative latecomer to the European scramble for Africa. By the time the Kaiser began snatching up territories in the 1880s, Imperial Germany had to pick around the edges of the older British and French properties. But German colonial holdings were soon vast, stretching from Togo and Cameroon in West Africa to modern-day Namibia in the southwest to Tanzania in the east. Within a couple of decades, major wars erupted out of the colonial violence in these areas, and, further afield, German military expeditions took the Kaiser’s forces to China (along the way occupying Papua and New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, and Samoa).

The proliferation of bloodshed belied any claims about Imperial Germany bringing a humanizing mission to rest of the world. Colonialism, socialists knew, was a brutal, immoral affair — a form of subjugation that flew in the face of their historic mission.

The SPD, the party’s seminal program [declared](#):

does not fight for new class privileges and class rights, but for the abolition of class rule and of classes themselves, for equal rights and equal obligations for all, without distinction of sex or birth. Starting from these views, it fights not only the exploitation and oppression of wage earners in society today, but every manner of exploitation and oppression, whether directed against a class, party, sex, or race.

But the Social Democrats also recognized that colonialism was their main competitor for the hopes and dreams of the working class. Ruling elites spun rousing tales of nationalism and colonialism, infused with heroism and glory and patriotic togetherness, in a conscious effort to blunt the intoxicating appeal of socialism. As SPD militant Karl Liebknecht thundered, “you just export the social question and conjure up before the eyes of people a kind of mirage in the sands and swamps of Africa.” If they could not dispel that mirage, Social Democrats feared they would be defamed as traitors and enemies, and nationalism — not socialism — would carry the day.

In 1907, the Second International — the collection of socialist and labor parties — passed a resolution at its assembly condemning all forms of colonialism, which the body judged a “politics of terror and despoliation.” This was the definitive message that Social Democracy was incompatible with colonialism and imperialism, that the ascendant socialist movement saw the liberation of oppressed workers in Europe as linked with that of colonial subjects. As Liebknecht would later put it, socialists must never mix “the dirty and bloody word ‘colonial policy’ with the sacred word ‘social democratic.’” The assembly also revealed the latent tensions within the SPD. The resolution narrowly passed, with more conservative members of the German delegation accommodating themselves to, or even embracing, colonialism. Some

worried that a full-throated denunciation of colonialism would open them up to state repression (hardly a paranoid fear given the party had been banned all through the 1880s) or that it would cause them to lose votes and slow their electoral rise.

There was less dissension in the ranks about antisemitism. The Dreyfus Affair in France, which saw a Jewish army captain accused of treason, turbocharged anti-Jewish sentiment across Europe. Rosa Luxemburg, avatar of the SPD left, rightly saw such prejudice as a weapon that everyone from the church to the military could use for anti-socialist, nationalist ends.

Antisemitism was not just a potent weapon in the hands of reactionary forces — it could also divert workers' attention from their true oppressors. Social Democratic leader August Bebel warned of a “socialism of fools” that staked out a “progressive” antisemitism by denouncing “Jewish capital” rather than capital as such.

As the Dreyfus Affair swirled, this kind of approach appeared to offer better prospects of success. It was easier to pillory Jewish business elites than take on capital as a whole. But no lesser a party figure than chief theoretician Karl Kautsky saw the dangers of this strategy. Scapegoating Jewish elites was not only inherently noxious — it also ended up stigmatizing Jewish workers and migrants. Like Muslim refugees or Latino migrants today, stereotypes of Jews at the time were as fleeing migrants as well as competing workers. Denouncing elite Jews would end up harming these non-elite Jews as well — and undermine working-class solidarity. To opt for the “socialism of fools” was to traverse through the briar patch of bigotry — out of which nothing resembling a socialist movement could emerge.

The case of Poland was a third instance in which the SPD distinguished itself. Around the time of the American Revolution, the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had fallen to the sword of three successive partitions, divvied up by the Prussian, Russian, and Austrian Empires. The commonwealth was one of the most democratic and progressive European states of its day — boasting a non-dynastic, electorally based monarchy and programs of universal education — and its disappearance was an object lesson in the rapacity of the European ruling elite. After accomplishing what had previously been unthinkable — dismembering a neighboring sovereign state — their “Overton window” of action busted wide open.

Yet the resilience of the Polish people was also proof that ruling classes had their limits. Writing in 1905, August Bebel [observed](#):

Though the last partition of Poland took place nearly 110 years ago, the aspirations of the Polish nations towards national independence, in the three conquering nations, are stronger than ever. An energetic nation, which has been injured in its language, in its civilisation, and therefore in its material interests, will always try to recover its national independence, because that alone guarantees the originality of its civilisation. In such cases of suppressed nationalities, Social Democrats argued that liberation must come as a prelude to, if not a necessary precondition of, socialism. “The normal development of the Socialist movement must be based certainly on the independence of a country,” Luxemburg wrote. “As long as a nation is oppressed, its members will not advocate the class-war, or will only do so in a modified form.” (More controversially, Luxemburg saw the SPD as the only political home for oppressed

Poles, insisting that “this party is also where the Polish workers must seek refuge, only here can they expect fraternal support and protection against the violence of the German government.”)

Welcoming the struggle of another nationality or domestic minority under socialism’s banner had an additional, crucial effect: it disarmed the ruling class of an instrument of distraction and distortion. Sensitive to the lures of prejudice, Luxemburg reminded the German working class that “they draw no benefit from the persecution of Poles, as those higher classes of German society, who hunt for profits and good positions among us. The German worker, just as our Polish worker or tradesman, in general never lives off injustice he inflicts on others, but from his own hard, but honest labor.”

## **Breaking Ranks**

Time and again, the Social Democrats proved themselves the only political force in prewar Germany to oppose colonialism and imperialism. Yet the party wasn’t devoid of figures that spoke the poisoned language of “colonial policy.” Conservative party figures like Eduard David, for instance, believed that colonialism would be inevitable even under a socialist government, which would continue and perhaps improve upon the “civilizing mission” of the European ruling powers. Famed theorist [Eduard Bernstein](#) supported some form of colonialism on the grounds that self-governing colonies could prove more democratic than continental European societies strangled by the powers of the old regime. Those outside the conservative camp resisted these pronouncements, often fiercely.

Such ideological splits could not have come at a worse time. The first decade of the twentieth century was the high point of German colonialism, and a particularly sly and media savvy chancellor, Von Bülow, correctly wagered that conservative Social Democrats could be picked off. When Social Democrats refused an expanded war budget to “put down” colonial uprisings in 1906 (in reality it was genocide), the chancellor dissolved parliament and launched a media manipulation campaign. Painting the anti-military Social Democrats as traitors and saboteurs of Germany’s world power pretensions, he cobbled together a new expansionist alliance that included liberals and even some unions and industrial organizations.

In elections the following year, the defamed “red enemies of the state” paid dearly for refusing to take a strong stand. For the first time, they lost electoral ground.

## **Condemning Genocide**

The public paralysis in 1907 foreshadowed the SPD’s deplorable vote seven years later to fund the country’s entrance into World War I — an affront to internationalism that would tear the party asunder. Many of the same figures that had issued apologies for German colonialism marched in step to the drumbeats of war. (Bernstein, to his credit, was a notable exception.)

Yet it’s a testament to the internationalist currents in the party that even as the SPD was fraying, prominent leaders denounced the ongoing Armenian genocide — perhaps the Social Democrats’ finest hour of intervention and support for the global

dispossessed.

Two decades earlier, German socialists had been among the sole voices to condemn the Hamidian massacres, where the number of Armenians killed — up to a couple hundred thousand — dwarfed even that of the anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia. In 1915, the Christian Armenian population (along with Assyrian and Pontic Greek Christians) were targeted for wholesale annihilation by a new regime that espoused a racist pan-Turkism. Identifying Armenians as a progressive religious minority, the Young Turks carried out a genocidal campaign of replacement and despoliation.

The German socialists, aware of the atrocities early on, correctly blamed not just the Young Turks but their political patrons, the Imperial German state. Party leaders such as Hugo Haase, Georg Ledebour, and Karl Liebknecht delivered the strongest denunciation of Ottoman crimes and German inaction. As early as January 1916, Liebknecht deemed the genocide “a sin now placed upon Germany.” For his principled stance, he was shouted down on the floor of parliament. Ledebour denounced the mass extermination in similarly scathing terms — “how socialists of any stripe could grant support to such a government is entirely unfathomable to me” — and later grabbed the strongest word available in German, *Schande* (indicating a deep, irremovable stain of shame), to characterize the country’s compliance. Calls for his censure were immediate.

## **Defending Human Equality**

The global solidarity that Social Democrats repeatedly showed stood in stark contrast to the silence (in the case of genocide) or vituperation (in the case of colonialism) that emanated from purportedly respectable circles. Whether directing their malevolent fury at Armenians, Jews, Slavs, or Africans, the Kaiser and his partisans justified pillaging and subjugation with reference to their victims’ “sub-human” status — an intolerable state of affairs for anyone that believed in the essential equality of all humanity.

These days, liberal humanitarians in the Global North employ lofty rhetoric about minorities in distress or the need to protect human rights. The best of the early German socialists give us something more than empty words, reminding us of the interconnected plight of the working class and oppressed minorities, as well as the means to fight exploitation. Their motivation to struggle for the persecuted abroad strengthened their resolve to fight for the exploited working class at home — and conjured up a vision of a global order of human rights truly worth the name.