Max Beer (1864–1943) was a Jewish-Austrian journalist and historian, born in Tarnobrzeg, a little town in Galicia. He migrated to Germany in 1889, where he became editor of the Magdeburger Volksstimme. After eight months, he was arrested, charged with inciting class-struggle and insulting the German army and authorities, convicted and sentenced to fourteen months of imprisonment. In June 1894, Beer moved to London and studied at the London School of Economics in 1895–6. In December 1897, he left for Paris, where he covered the Dreyfuss affair. From there, he moved to New York, where he spent the crucial years 1898–1901 (the time of the Spanish-American War and the Filipino Rebellion) and witnessed the birth of American imperialism, which he analysed for Die Neue Zeit and Vorwärts, the main journals of German Social Democracy. Beer was also correspondent for the Munchener Post and the Jewish Arbeiter-Zeitung and collaborated in editing the Encyclopaedia Judaica. Max Beer’s other major works include his massive General History of Socialism and Social Struggles, issued in English in five separate volumes, and his History of British Socialism.¹

When Eduard Bernstein left England in 1901 to return to Germany, Beer was asked to replace him in London as English correspondent for the Vorwärts, a position he occupied from 1902 to 1912. In 1915, he was deported to Germany as an enemy-alien, and from 1919 to 1921 he edited Die Glocke, a journal founded and financed by Parvus, who, at that time, belonged to the extreme right wing of the SPD (the Lensch-Cunow-Haenisch group). In his autobiography, Fifty Years of International Socialism, Beer claims that he attempted to turn the paper away from the SPD and into a cultural and educational review, causing Parvus eventually to dismiss him. Beer later worked, at Ryazanov’s request, at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow from 1927–9, and subsequently at the Institut für Sozialforschung in Frankfurt am Main. In 1933, after the Nazis’ rise to power destroyed his family, he went into exile once more in London, where he died in 1943.

In Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, Lenin cited the article that we have translated here and commented as follows:

In the most flourishing period of free competition in Great Britain, i.e., between 1840 and 1860, the leading British bourgeois politicians were opposed to colonial policy and were of the opinion that the liberation of the colonies, their complete separation from Britain, was inevitable and desirable. M. Beer, in an article, ‘Modern British Imperialism,’ [Die Neue Zeit, XVI, I, p. 302.] published in 1898, shows that in 1852, Disraeli, a statesman who was generally inclined towards imperialism, declared: ‘The colonies are millstones round our necks.’ But at the end of the nineteenth century the British heroes of the hour were Cecil Rhodes and Joseph Chamberlain, who openly advocated imperialism and applied the imperialist policy in the most cynical manner!

It is not without interest to observe that even then these leading British bourgeois politicians saw the connection between what might be called the purely economic and the socio-political roots of modern imperialism. Chamberlain advocated imperialism as a ‘true, wise and economical policy’, and pointed particularly to the German, American and Belgian competition which Great Britain was encountering in the world market. Salvation lies in monopoly, said the capitalists as they formed cartels, syndicates and trusts.