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RAW MATERIAL AND IMPERIALISM

With blood and iron to rubber

To this day a »critical raw material« and indispensable for the automotive industry. On the colonial history of rubber

Gertrud Rettenmaier conducts research on colonial history using the example of raw materials and outstanding people from German colonial rule. In cooperation with the Rhein-Neckar-Industriekultur Association, the Mannheim Colonial History Working Group and the Mannheim Alliance for Just World Trade, she works on the colonial ties between the economy of Mannheim and the Rhine-Neckar region.

The European Union lists rubber as the only organic material on its "list of critical raw materials". The European Association of the Tire and Rubber Industry explains why: »Natural rubber is an important raw material for the European tire and rubber industry and is a key factor for various branches of industry - especially the automotive industry. The tire industry alone requires around 76 percent of all natural rubber produced worldwide. There is currently no substitute for rubber from hevea trees that could be used in all current applications. "The German Rubber Industry Association emphasized in April 2020:" Mobility and economic progress are unthinkable without rubber products - and German manufacturers offer the highest quality."The annual turnover of the German rubber industry with its 73,000 employees in 2019 was eleven billion euros.

Various tropical plants were used for rubber production in the course of industrialization, but the hevea tree from the Amazon region prevailed in the plantation economy. To extract the natural raw material, the juice from the cut bark is collected in small containers. Various processes make it transportable and storable. The natural rubber is mainly processed in the industrialized north. So there is a classic colonial connection, the history of which is extremely illuminating.

The birth of an industry

Since the 17th century there have been reports in Europe of games with elastic balls in Central America and of waterproof shoes made from tree sap by the inhabitants of the Amazon region. The name of the mysterious material Cao utsche - tear of the tree - came to Europe from Quechua in South America and was transformed into "rubber" via Spanish and French.

Dried rubber was initially brought to Europe in small quantities in shipments from the New World. From 1770 small cubes were sold as erasers. In 1823, Macintosh raincoats coated

with a rubber-benzene solution came onto the market in England. However, these did not sell well because they became sticky in the heat and stiff in the cold. Charles Goodyear found the solution to this problem in the USA in 1839 with so-called vulcanization. He found out that the addition of sulfur makes rubber temperature-resistant and that, depending on the amount of sulfur, rubber can be made into hard rubber or elastic soft rubber. Machines such as the calender were developed for shredding, mixing and rolling into smooth, uniform materials. This created the prerequisites for the industrial processing of the first malleable material, which was now also known as rubber

The first rubber factories opened in the 1850s, also in Germany. In 1856 the Phoenix Gummiwerke began in Hamburg-Harburg, and from 1860 a factory of the French Hutchinson in Mannheim began to manufacture waterproof shoes. Numerous others followed throughout Germany. In 1895 there were 339 rubber factories in Germany with 12,500 employees, including 45 large companies with more than 50 employees. They produced a wide range of goods from combs to waterproof textiles, hoses, straps, tapes, tubes, medical items, baby teats, breast pumps and condoms to insulation and seals.

In the years that followed, however, the rubber industry experienced a much more dynamic development due to the emergence of pneumatic tires for road vehicles. In 1907, 32,000 people were already working in the rubber industry; in 1912, 15 million bicycle tires were produced in Germany, as well as tires for motorcycles and cars. In an anniversary publication by Continental from 1955, it is reported that between 1905 and 1909 the 36 stock corporations in the German rubber industry recorded average returns of 6.9 percent and paid dividends of 15 percent on average.² The workers, on the other hand, lived mostly in poverty. Her everyday life was strained by cramped living conditions, frequent health problems and worrying about the most essential things. The large labor supply of a growing population made it possible for the production companies to pay their workers only as much as they needed to survive until the labor movement grew stronger. Most of the work in the rubber factories was unskilled, mostly women. In 1900 they received a wage of 35 marks per month for a six-day week and 11 hours of work per day. The average monthly wage of industrial workers at that time was 63 marks, male chemical workers earned up to 120 marks a month. Most of the work in the rubber factories was unskilled, mostly women. In 1900 they received a wage of 35 marks per month for a six-day week and 11 hours of work per day. The average monthly wage of industrial workers at that time was 63 marks, male chemical workers earned up to 120 marks a month. Most of the work in the rubber factories was unskilled, mostly women. In 1900 they received a wage of 35 marks per month for a six-day week and 11 hours of work per day. The average monthly wage of industrial workers at that time was 63 marks, male chemical workers earned up to 120 marks a month.

In part of the rubber processing industry, the so-called patent rubber industry, where particularly thin-layered products such as condoms, medical gloves or rubber-coated textiles were manufactured, the workers had to immerse the products in bowls with a carbon disulfide solution. During this so-called cold vulcanization, the workers suffered severe poisoning.³

From the 1890s onwards, the growing number of areas of application caused rapid demand for rubber and the associated price increases. A feverish search for the "black gold" of the tropics broke out among merchants. Johann Feichtner, who started working for Bolivian rubber companies from Hamburg in 1897, presented the situation in retrospect as follows: "The word rubber was fascinating at the time, everything was crazy about the elastic product on which the entire huge Amazon valley lived and that for Peru, Bolivia and Brazil threw enormous exit tariffs. «Trading companies from the industrialized countries penetrated deep into the Amazon forests of the countries mentioned, built a network of factories and paths and brought the local population to it with tempting barter goods, but also with coercive measures

and rum, to tap and deliver rubber from the trees growing in the wild. Feichtner reminded the competition of the rubber companies, the "Indian trapping" and the forced labor of "medieval law of the thumb and robber barons"

Overexploitation in the colonies

Although most of the rubber in demand in Europe was imported from South America, the rubber boom also spread to the colonies in Africa. In 1884 all European states, the Ottoman Empire and the USA had agreed on their access rights to the areas of Africa. They claimed the exploitation of their colonies without regard to their inhabitants. European research expeditions reported an abundance of rubber-producing trees and lianas in the forests, fueling the activities of merchants. The use of rubber was not known to the African population until then, they were trained to tap. From the "private colony" of the Congo, reports of brutal coercive measures by the Belgian king in order to wrest the population of rubber delivery came early on. Something similar happened in all colonies of the tropical latitudes. The example of Cameroon shows how during the German colonial era - fueled by the rubber rush - the population was forced to work and the existing economic and social structures were destroyed.

The two Hamburg trading companies Woermann as well as Jantzen and Thormählen have been active on the coast of Cameroon since the 1860s. They initially bought goods such as ivory and palm oil from African middlemen, and from the 1890s onwards they bought more and more rubber. In 1884 they pushed for military support from the empire in order to be able to advance into the interior of Cameroon: "For the exploitation of the as yet undeveloped, large and populous hinterland, it is of the utmost importance to enter into direct contact with the inhabitants of the same, to avoid the hindering and eliminate costly middlemen," explained Thormählen in 1884. This contributed to Bismarck's decision to come to an understanding with the other imperialist powers over areas of influence in Africa and to found the German colonies in 1884. In order to conquer the hinterland, the German Reich first set up a police force in 1891, which was reinforced with slaves bought in Dahomey, today's Benin. In 1895 this was expanded to become a colonial »Schutztruppe« - meaning the protection of merchants

The troops carried out their task of conquering access routes and forcing the local population into submission with brutal violence. Military reports describe how villages were burned down, plantings destroyed, people shot, whipped, evicted or captured, women and children used as hostages. In the face of the violence, individual villages submitted, while others offered bitter resistance. Revolts were systematically put down. If villages were finally defeated, the village elders were penalized, e.g. B. in the form of rubber to be delivered, or obliged to provide forced labor.⁸ A growing number of civil servants subjected the population to a system of coercion and control; flogging with the hippo whip was not uncommon. In 1908, the incumbent governor Theodor Seitz introduced a tax for every adult man amounting to 30 working days per year. Those who did not do this had to do three months of forced labor.

The trading companies penetrated step by step inland and set up factories for the intermediate trade. The motivation to tap and deliver rubber initially took place, similar to in South America, with the method of so-called trust trading, the temporary credit for goods. European goods or international commodities were presented as gifts and, if interested, exchanged for work to be performed in the future or quantities of rubber to be delivered. A packet of matches, salt, a piece of shiny cloth, or a knife aroused great interest. Those who owned such things could gain special prestige in their own community. However, the exchange relationships were asymmetrical: Cheap imported goods were exchanged for a high

workload, e.g. B. 1906 six kilograms of rubber, ie about 30 days of work for a machete. As a rule, people got into debt bondage from which they could not free themselves for a long time. Brandy was also given out and alcohol addiction was exploited.

Albert Wirz describes how the rubber trade disintegrated the previous social order. Before the penetration of the European traders, African traders had sold luxury goods such as salt, pearls, fabrics or weapons to village elders in exchange for slaves, ivory or kola nuts, which were sold in the village units according to fixed rules, e.g. B. in marriage, were awarded. The rubber extraction now also gave individuals access to prestige goods, because everyone could go in search of the coveted groupage. This had serious consequences: because a large part of the population had become an appendage to the rubber business, self-sufficiency collapsed in many villages. The introduction of wage labor and money shook the solidarity of the communities. New conflicts over reputation and authority arose, which the colonial power took advantage of.

Rubber indicators

A number of rubber companies were active in South Cameroon. In addition, in 1898, based on the model of the Belgian Congo, the imperial government awarded an area the size of Bavaria as "ownerless land" for development and use to the private company South Cameroon (GSK), which was supported by German banks and Hamburg merchants. The initiator Julius Scharlach, a Hamburg lawyer, pleaded for the exploitation of the population of Africa: "The difference of race is decisive. The negro is by nature a slave, just as the European is by nature a suitor. «⁹

The GSK used the support of the colonial army, but also used its own methods to mobilize workers. With the expansion of the rubber trade, the trust trade could no longer attract enough workers. This was particularly true for the recruitment of porters to bring the rubber on their backs to the coast. Instead of giving in to demands for better wages, the GSK used violence. An agent of the Cameroon South concession company reported in 1906: "In order to force people to porter services or to cut rubber, their workers are allowed to raid a village. The residents are captured, tied up and forced to work «.¹⁰ The porters were often kept happy with alcohol.

In order to keep sales prices within Cameroon at two to three marks, the GSK joined forces with the smaller rubber companies in 1909 to form a rubber company. The world market price per kilo was ten to twelve marks in 1910.¹¹ The situation escalated. In retrospect, Governor Theodor Seitz presented the situation as follows: »The rubber bull market (...) had caused a wild rubber hunt in the whole of the south. The entire working population was in an uproar. The villages were empty. Anything that did not tap rubber in the woods was on the way to and from the coast as porters. Nevertheless, there were constant complaints about the lack of porters. Far inland, in areas that had been completely unknown a few years ago, factories were established whose only business was the purchase of rubber. "There were famines and epidemics. The Kribi district office in South Cameroon reported that men up to 52 kilograms, women up to 44 kilograms and children up to 20 kilograms had to carry heavy loads, sometimes on routes that took them several weeks. The inhabitants of the villages along the way could not feed the thousands of porters and left their settlements because of the pressure to eat.

In view of this situation, the Berlin colonial department enacted a "neglect-preserving policy", since workers were now recognized as "the most important asset" of the colonial economy. The colonial government tried, with moderate success, to intervene in a regulating manner, among other things with a carrier order and the forced settlement of catering villages along the route.

Fall in prices

Due to the continuous expansion of the exploitation areas and the squeezing of the population, the Cameroon rubber companies succeeded in increasing export volumes by 1913. Then suddenly the collection of wild rubber was no longer lucrative, because world market prices plummeted due to a large supply of cheaper plantation rubber from British colonies in South and Southeast Asia. Little by little, the British colonial empire established large-scale rubber plantations from seeds of South American heap plants illegally imported from Brazil in 1876. In Cameroon, the companies stopped their business after a short time and withdrew their 280 European employees. With the cushion of their profits from the period of the gubbish boom, they could turn to new areas of trade. There are no reports that reached Germany about the situation of the local workforce and intermediaries.

The British dominance in the world rubber market prompted representatives of the fast-growing American car and tire industry to set up plantations themselves in the 1920s. The tire manufacturer Firestone leased land in Liberia in 1926. To this day, the group - today under the name Bridgestone - operates the largest connected and industrially managed rubber farm in the world with an area of almost 520 square kilometers. An attempt by Henry Ford to set up a plantation in a vast area of land in the Brazilian Amazon forest was abandoned due to plant diseases.

Today 90 percent of the natural rubber produced worldwide comes from Asia. The largest producers are Thailand and Indonesia. New plantings took place in China, Cambodia, Panama and in African countries. For the creation of plantations, rainforest was and is being destroyed, and people were and are being driven from their land. From industrially managed plantations, e.g. B. in Liberia, human rights violations are known. Often day laborers are employed without employment contracts who are recruited in very poor regions. Wages are paid that do not secure a livelihood, which means that extra work is forced. Pesticides must be applied without protective clothing.¹²

However, 85 percent of the world's rubber production comes from smallholders who grow rubber in mono- or mixed cultures. However, the family businesses are subject to the same world market prices as large plantations and are also dependent on a local trade network. Because rubber trees need at least five years to be tapped and then be used for around 25 years for good yield, families are tied to their investment decisions for a long time, even if prices fall. A case study by the Südwind Institute on rubber cultivation in family businesses in Indonesia shows that families, including children, are forced to work excessively long hours in order to be able to feed themselves. The income is often not enough to care for the trees, let alone for the education of the children.¹³

IG colors

In both world wars Germany was almost completely cut off from the rubber supply. During the First World War, rubber for vehicle tires, airships, submarines and gas masks became militarily relevant and covered by the confiscation of stocks and the use of scrap rubber. The production of artificial rubbers was promoted under high pressure.

In the 1930s, IG Farben AG developed the production of styrene-butadiene rubber, or Buna for short, which could partially replace natural rubber. In order to be able to supply the navy, the air force and the army's vehicles, natural rubber and buna were made subject to the state raw material management. At the urging of the Wehrmacht, IG Farben expanded its facilities in Schkopau, opened a further plant in Huls and began mass production of the synthetic rubber, which was important for the war effort, in 1939. In April 1941, in close cooperation with the SS, the company began to build a large new plant in Auschwitz-Monowitz. Thousands of concentration camp inmates and prisoners of war were deployed on this

construction site. In October 1942, IG Farben opened the »Buna Camp«, its own concentration camp, in the immediate vicinity of its company premises. later also called Auschwitz III. Thousands of prisoners died from the inhuman working conditions on the construction site or were murdered in the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau as soon as they were no longer able to work. A recent publication by Continental, already the largest German tire manufacturer at the time, discloses the use of forced labor and concentration camp prisoners. After 1945, the extremely energy-intensive Buna production lost its importance. Since then, various synthetic rubbers with special properties have been developed on the basis of petroleum. Thousands of prisoners died as a result of the inhumane working conditions on the construction site or were murdered in the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau as soon as they were no longer able to work.¹⁴ The tire industry was also subject to the war economy and increasingly switched to processing Buna. A recent publication by Continental, which was already the largest German tire manufacturer at the time, reveals the use of forced labor and concentration camp prisoners.¹ After 1945, the extremely energy-intensive Buna production lost its importance. Since then, various synthetic rubbers with special properties have been developed on the basis of petroleum. Thousands of prisoners died as a result of the inhumane working conditions on the construction site or were murdered in the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau as soon as they were no longer able to work. The tire industry was also subjected to the war economy and increasingly switched to processing Buna. A recent publication by Continental, which was already the largest German tire manufacturer at the time, reveals the use of forced labor and concentration camp prisoners.¹⁵ After 1945, the extremely energy-intensive Buna production lost its importance. Since then, various synthetic rubbers with special properties have been developed on the basis of petroleum.¹⁴ The tire industry was also subjected to the war economy and increasingly switched to processing Buna. A recent publication by Continental, which was already the largest German tire manufacturer at the time, reveals the use of forced labor and concentration camp prisoners.¹⁵ After 1945, the extremely energy-intensive Buna production lost its importance. Since then, various synthetic rubbers with special properties have been developed on the basis of petroleum.¹⁴ The tire industry was also subject to the war economy and increasingly switched to processing Buna. A recent publication by Continental, which was already the largest German tire manufacturer at the time, reveals the use of forced labor and concentration camp prisoners.¹ After 1945, the extremely energy-intensive Buna production lost its importance. Since then, various synthetic rubbers with special properties have been developed on the basis of petroleum.

Current situation

In 2019, 13.4 million tons of natural rubber were traded on the world market. That is more than 13,000 times as much as in 1912. In addition, there are almost 15 million tons of special synthetic rubbers that are made on the basis of petroleum. In Germany, 73,000 people worked in the rubber processing industry in 2019, with labor-intensive production areas being outsourced to countries with lower wages.

The product range extends from pure natural rubber products to special products made from synthetic polymers. Tire manufacture is dominant, in which three quarters of natural rubber and the largest part of synthetic rubber are used and processed into a composite material. Its recycling is only possible to a very limited extent. According to the Federal Environment Agency, rubber granulate can only be used to a limited extent in the manufacture of new tires due to existing quality requirements (...). Instead, it is used in artificial turf fillings or rubber mats. The situation in the countries producing natural rubber could be improved by a supply chain law that obliges companies to be transparent about their supply chains and the working

conditions of the producers. To do this, pressure would first have to be exerted on the major tire manufacturers.

The crisis in the automotive industry also affects the rubber processing industry. As reported by the German Rubber Industry Association, the industry's turnover fell by 4.2 percent in 2019. In 2020, Continental made headlines with the closure of the tire plant in Aachen and job cuts at other locations. In its "Mobility Study" from 2020, however, Continental stated: "Individual transport based on cars is firmly anchored in most people's everyday lives and will probably remain so for a long time to come."

Remarks

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