The Colonial Tempest, 1905–1906

By the spring of 1904 developments overseas and in Germany had rendered the political equilibrium within the ranks of the Center and between that party and Berlin quite precarious. After May 1905 this delicate balance rapidly crumbled as widespread African resistance to German rule further exposed and aggravated administrative, financial, and parliamentary issues dividing the Center from the government. The outbreak of the Maji Maji Uprising in East Africa in July 1905 and the Bonambela Duala chieftains’ contemporaneous Reichstag petition of grievances against the Kamerun government together compounded the intensely adverse effects that Southwest African and Togolese resistance continued to have upon the government-Center partnership through the crisis of December 1906.1

Under the barrage of African initiatives, the colonial debates of the 1905/06 parliamentary season witnessed the eruption of a significant rift within the Center as well as a dramatic breach between the Catholic party and the Bülow administration. While the moderation of such Center populists as Matthias Erzberger and Richard Müller-Fulda had previously helped keep the colonial issue in abeyance, both men abandoned that tack in exasperation in mid-1905 and joined forces with those more radical Catholic populists who had long been averse to the party leadership’s governmentalism. In the ensuing parliamentary debates the united populists accordingly cheered Erzberger’s relentless and often indiscriminate attacks upon the colonial administration.

Meanwhile, the jurist party leaders found themselves in an increasingly untenable situation. Far more aware than Erzberger of the delicacy of the Center’s political position, the jurists feared that the young Swabian’s lack of restraint might so alienate Berlin as to jeopardize the party’s parliamentary primacy. On the other hand, the senior Centrists themselves had already found ample cause to criticize the government’s handling of colonial affairs during the previous two years, a tendency that only intensified in 1905/06. Consequently, the widening gulf between official impenitence and populist outrage left the Center leaders swinging to and fro between sharp castigation

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of the former and futile admonition against the latter. Ultimately, the jurists’
desperate zigzag course failed to avert the expulsion of the Center from its
decisive political position in December 1906.

Multiple African Uprisings and Government-Center Relations

During the period from Spring 1904 to Summer 1905 the Herero and Nama
Uprisings had precipitated Centrist demands for frugality and parliamentary
vigilance in colonial affairs, yet these had been partially offset for most of
the party by patriotic and confessional considerations. At that time the aris-
tocratic, jurist, and moderate populist elements of the party had displayed
considerable coordination in supporting or opposing Berlin’s various colonial
proposals and policies before the Reichstag. This balancing act had both kept
the party united and preserved its position as a governmental party.

After mid-1905 this pattern altered dramatically under the mounting
onslaught of African initiatives. With the Maji Maji Uprising in East Africa,
the ballooning costs of the Namaland campaign, and the litany of Akwa griev-
ances in Kamerun, the crisis in German-ruled Africa reached a new height.
As confidence in the Colonial Department thereby eroded, Centrists of all
persuasions responded with efforts to contain the financial and parliamen-
tary consequences of the African military initiatives and with attempts to
preclude further rebellions by pressing Berlin for greater justice for colonized
populations.

Still, the pursuit of this stronger colonial political line vis-à-vis Berlin was
accompanied by moments of strife as well as accord within the party. On the
one hand, the Center Party elders at times took the government’s part against
the insistence of heretofore moderate populists on protection and expansion
of the Reichstag’s parliamentary and colonial legislative prerogatives. Moreover,
the jurist leaders also attached much more significance than the populists
to the domestic confessional issue of anticlericalism, but their declining health
and multiple obligations continued to hamper their influence within the party.
While Erzberger repeatedly attacked the Colonial Department and the Bülow
administration, the senior Centrists warned in vain that an overly conspicu-
ous exertion of Catholic parliamentary muscle would fan the flames of anti-
clericalism to new heights, thereby endangering the party’s strategic position.2

2 Bachem to [Franz Bachem?], Dec. 4, 1905, Nachlaß Bachem, 239, HASK. Bachem, Mar. 21, 1906,
Note, Nachlaß Bachem, 238, HASK. Bachem, May 27, 1906, Note, Nachlaß Bachem, 242, HASK.
Bachem, Dec. 15, 20, 1906, Notes; Bachem to Spahn, Dec. 6, 10, 1906; Bachem to Otto, May 18,