CHAPTER 11

The Breach, Mid to Late 1906

The accumulated mutual frustration between government and Center first erupted into an unmistakable breach as three important colonial proposals were all struck down by the Catholic party in the course of a single day, May 26, 1906.1 Two of these three clashes—the rejection of the Kubub-Keetmanshoop Railroad and the refusal of further compensation to the expropriated settlers of Southwest Africa—have been discussed in the previous chapter as functions of Herero and Nama success in imposing tremendous military costs upon the Reich. The third major conflict of May 26, the obstruction of the establishment of an Imperial Colonial Office likewise emerged out of the consequences of African initiatives. Here, too, as the party-government partnership began to crumble, certain jurist and aristocratic Centrists subscribed to the necessity of the state secretary’s office and the imperative of cooperation with Berlin on the issue with the result that the rift in the party’s ranks manifested itself more openly. At the same time, the rapidly growing intractability of the Centrist majority in colonial affairs increasingly undermined Bülow’s crucial relationship with the Kaiser. Threatened in his position largely by domestic reverberations from African resistance movements, the chancellor found the prospect of a dramatic break with the Catholic party ever more appealing.

African Resistance, Centrist Recalcitrance, Bülow’s Insecurity

Admittedly, the widespread Centrist opposition to the establishment of a Colonial Office arose from pragmatic as well as partisan considerations. Nearly a full year before Hohenlohe-Langenburg’s appointment, Peter Spahn had expressed his skepticism regarding the utility of severing the Colonial Department from the Foreign Office.2 When the government then officially put forward its proposal in late 1905, both Spahn and Erzberger observed that


2 Spahn, Dec. 9, 1904, RTSB, 3450A.
the existing institutional arrangement facilitated interagency communication and a desirable consistency in Germany’s foreign policy toward other colonial powers. They feared, namely, that the elevation of the colonial director to the same rank as the foreign secretary would lead to heated policy disagreements analogous to those exhibited by their French ministerial counterparts. Similarly, Centrists were privately concerned that a colonial secretary might obtain undue influence through his official direct access to the Kaiser and then force the chancellor to accept overly expensive or adventurous projects. Finally, Centrists of both persuasions objected that the reorganization in Berlin would do nothing to address the more obvious deficiencies of the bureaucracy overseas.

Still, although the Center delegation resolved in early March 1906 to vote against establishing a Colonial Office, it was not actually opposed to the measure in principle and could most probably have been persuaded to put aside its reservations but for the repercussions from African resistance movements. As it was, about one-fifth of the Center delegation found Berlin’s arguments for the reorganization sufficiently persuasive to abstain from the Reichstag votes or even to break party rank entirely and vote for the bill. This contingent of Colonial Office supporters encompassed not only such aristocrats as Arenberg, Ballestrem, and Hertling, but also ten jurists including Bachem, Fritzen, Am Zehnhoff, Schwarze-Lippstadt, and Kalkhoff. Indeed, at Bülow’s behest, the now mildly supportive Spahn nearly succeeded in shifting the Center’s weight

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4 Fritzen, Dec. 6, 1905, RTSB, 1358/C. Bachem, Mar. 21, 1906, Note, Nachlaß Bachem, 2447, HASK.