5 The Emergence of Conflict, 1893–96

So far as southern African policy was concerned, the governmental reorganization of October 1894 was a landmark, for, as a consequence of it, the restraining hand of Caprivi's anti-African views was entirely removed. With the presumption of Germany's concentration on central Europe no longer at the heart of policy, other developments became possible. Much was made of this opportunity: as early as August 1893, while Caprivi was occupied with problems in the Prussian ministry of state, Marschall had already begun to flex Germany's muscles in southern Africa. With Caprivi's departure, such activities were able to start in earnest.

From the preceding it seems clear that the nature of Germany's South African policy was dependent upon both the composition of the administrative elite and the balance of power within it. While this clarifies the circumstances that made possible a change of policy towards the end of the Caprivi chancellorship, it does not explain why the Reich government decided to utilize Caprivi's imminent departure in order to take a sudden and active interest in a part of the world that it had always previously considered it prudent to eschew.

One possibility that has been suggested by many historians, most notably Erich Brandenburg, William Langer and Raymond Sontag, is that Germany's interest in the Transvaal was inspired primarily by a desire to effect a shift in the structure of the European balance of power.¹ In this scenario, South Africa was but a pawn in a German diplomatic game that had as its objective the goal of teaching the British government that a policy of 'splendid isolation' was no longer practicable and that rather than facing the enmity of Germany it would be preferable to seek closer relations by joining the Triple Alliance on German terms. The tactics of such a policy were clear. If the Wilhelmstraße were to be successful in its endeavour to persuade the British government both of the precariousness of its position and of the remedial nature of German friendship, then it would be necessary not only to put up barriers to British policy by thwarting her desires and helping her opponents on a global basis, thus demonstrating the potential scope of German opposition, but also to highlight the depth of British difficulties by meddling in an area where the sensibilities of Her Majesty's Government were most acute. Naturally, it was assumed

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that the greater were Britain's problems, the more inconvenient would be any German actions and the more willing would be the British to come to terms. For this reason, Britain's relations with the Transvaal were a natural focus for German attention. Not only did the determination of the Boers to resist the advances of their mighty neighbour attract nigh-universal sympathy and admiration but, moreover, the ambiguity of their international position and the strength of German interests in the region allowed ample scope for extensive interference of a kind that, while unlikely to be frowned upon by any other power, would most certainly exacerbate Britain's worries.

If it were the intention of Germany through her South African policy to coerce the United Kingdom into the Triple Alliance by demonstrating that, although Britain would be hard pressed to do without it, the Reich's goodwill could not nonetheless be taken for granted, then it should be noted that there were times when it came close to bringing about the desired result, at least as far as a recognition of the importance of German amity was concerned. Writing on the day of the Kruger telegram, Sir Henry Loch, the British High Commissioner in South Africa, observed that

the question is greatly complicated by the action of Germany, who claims rights of interference in the Transvaal that we cannot for a moment admit....This difficulty coming at the present moment is very unfortunate as it is generally feared that the United States intends to go to war with us and that they will have the support of Russia and France. That is bad enough, but to have Germany likewise against us, would reduce us to having to fight for our very existence....

Had the diplomats of the Wilhelmstraße really directed their efforts in the Transvaal towards the goal of forcing Britain to turn to Germany for a relief to her difficulties, then doubtless they would have found the above opinion most satisfactory. However, Sir Henry's correspondence is no proof of German intentions, the truth of which must be sought from indigenous sources. Unfortunately, the evidence from these is by no means convincing. That Germany wanted to draw Britain into her orbit is undeniable. In reporting a conversation he had with the British military attaché, the Kaiser informed Marschall that he had warned Colonel Swaine that 'England could only escape from her present complete isolation...by a frank and outspoken attitude either for or against the Triple Alliance. The first demanded a formula, such as was customary between continental powers, i.e. a sealed and signed guarantee.' Clearly, in order to achieve so