

JOSEPH MARIA BAERNREITHER AND THE AUSTRIAN
GOVERNMENT'S POLICY OF NATIONAL SETTLEMENT
IN BOHEMIA (1908—1914)

Harald Bachmann

The effort to achieve settlements with the nationalities of the Danube monarchy presented one of the most difficult domestic political tasks which Austria had to face. After the introduction of universal, equal suffrage, it was above all the task of Baron Bienerth's government (1908—1911) to continue the negotiations with the Czechs which had been underway since the Koerber ministry and to bring them to a successful conclusion. Already under Koerber, the former minister Dr. Baernreither (1845—1925) had done his utmost to reach an understanding with the Czechs. His marked skill as a negotiator and his broad connections with Czech and German politicians helped give him a favourable starting position. Under Baron Bienerth, these negotiations made little headway, and in his diaries, Baernreither was not sparing in critical remarks about the Prime Minister's lack of energy. These diaries, part of the extensive and valuable collected papers of Baernreither which were given to the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna, also represent an important source for appraising German party politics in Bohemia in this period.

It is characteristic of the *Realpolitiker* Baernreither that he did not believe that much was to be gained from a strong emphasis on the national point of view. Unfortunately, his broad knowledge of social problems was underestimated by the influential German politicians of Austria. The German party leaders in Bohemia also failed to exploit sufficiently his outstanding abilities for their cause. Baernreither supported the Governor of Bohemia, Prince Franz Thun-Hohenstein, who was sympathetic to the idea of a settlement, even though he was aware that Thun was increasingly approaching the Czech national position. The aim of the settlement negotiations of 1910—12 was to achieve a demarcation between the German- and Czech-speaking areas of Bohemia. Baernreither was no friend of any demarcation according to nationality in a compact area of settlement like Bohemia. In the negotiations

for a settlement, he also attempted to come to grips with the economic and social needs of the population, giving them precedence wherever this was possible. Here he showed understanding for the wishes of the Czechs, and was equally aware of the fact that the situation of the Germans in Bohemia had increasingly deteriorated since 1910. He therefore urged the acceptance of a reasonably supportable partial settlement. With this correct evaluation of the play of forces, Baernreither was more advanced than the other German delegates, but he was unable to win over the influential German representatives to support the conclusion of a limited settlement.

The political work of the legally elected German-Bohemian representatives was also greatly impaired by the competition of extraparlimentary popular organizations (such as the „German People's Council for Bohemia“, located in Trebnitz near Leitmeritz, and the „Central Office of the German Districts of Bohemia“). With the competing influence of these auxiliary organizations, the political life of German Bohemia offered a depressing picture of fragmentation.

The fundamental issues in the negotiations for a settlement were: (1) national self-determination; and (2) the required unity of the land. The appraisal of these questions by the leading German parties of Bohemia varied.

The understanding which Baernreither strove to attain was supported above all by the party of large landowners. The German Radical Party and the German Agrarian Party also favoured the speedy successful conclusion of the negotiations. The representatives of the other bourgeois parties, however, feared that too broad concessions would be made to the Czechs. The Progressive Party and the All-German Party felt that by adjourning the conferences, an agreement that was more favourable to the Germans could be achieved. With almost prophetic insight, Baernreither warned against adjournment. His premonitions were proven fully justified — the starting point for negotiations was never again to be as favourable as it had been in 1910.