

A Separate Peace with Russia? (November 19, 1914)

Abstract

Late in 1914, General Falkenhayn (1861–1922), then the head of the Supreme Command, told the chancellor that he believed that Germany could not win the war militarily. He was convinced that a military decision on the eastern front was impossible. England, he believed, was Germany's most dangerous foe, and to persuade it of German invincibility, Falkenhayn envisaged a massive German offensive in the west, coupled with submarine warfare against British commerce. The success of these ventures depended, in turn, on a separate peace in the east. With the aid of diplomacy, Falkenhayn hoped that a limited offensive would achieve a "moderate defeat" of the Russian army. The full force of the German military could then turn toward the west. The conclusions that Falkenhayn drew from these military calculations, however, were tortuous and politically ill-conceived; they offered no resolution to the strategic dilemma. Bethmann Hollweg was skeptical of his plan as were Falkenhayn's two main military rivals, Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1936) and Erich Ludendorff (1865–1937).

Source

General von Falkenhayn judged the situation in this way: As long as Russia, France, and England held together, it would be impossible for us to defeat our enemies in a way that would bring about a proper peace. In fact, we would be in danger of slowly exhausting ourselves. Either Russia or France must be separated from the coalition. Should we succeed in concluding a peace with Russia, as we should attempt to do first of all, we would be in a position to bring France to its knees to the point where we could dictate peace, even if the Japanese were to cross the sea in France's support and even if England were to keep sending reserves into the field. It is certainly to be expected that if Russia were to make peace, France, too, would give in. Then, were England unwilling completely to accede to our will, we would, supported by Belgium, force the country to give in by starving it out with a blockade, even if the effort were to take months. [...]

After the effort failed to defeat France in the first stage of the war, and in view of the course of our military operations in the west during the present, second stage of the war, I, too, have to doubt whether it is still possible to defeat our opponents militarily, as long as the Triple Entente holds together.

Should Hindenburg remain victorious, we will in any case be able to keep Prussia, Posen, and Silesia free from Russian invasion this winter. – It is absolutely impossible to anticipate how things will play out in the Galician theater. – As long as strong army divisions must remain in the east, we will succeed in holding on to the area that we presently occupy in the west, perhaps even in expanding it to a small degree, eventually taking Verdun and thus forcing the French to retreat from the Aisne to positions on the Marne. The complete defeat and destruction of our enemy in a decisive battle appears, however, to be out of the question to judge from the always reserved reports of the General Staff. This situation will obtain throughout the winter; in fact, we can tolerate it as *politically* entirely advantageous, but it does not offer any chances for a decisive *military victory* as a consequence. As far as I can judge the situation, we can only hope for such a victory if we can commit our army that is in the east to France. In this event we could, if we believed it to be proper, even reject a future peace offer from France and defeat France militarily, with a little luck, to the extent that France would have to accept any kind of peace that we desire – and at the same time, if the navy holds out, which it has promised to do, to impose our will on England. Thus by accepting the price that the situation with respect to Russia will remain basically as it was before the war, we can create appropriate conditions toward the west. And this outcome would

represent the elimination of the Triple Entente. [...]

All in all, one must consider the situation serious despite all confidence in success. Developments near Ypres are typical. Despite the great bravery of our troops, we have not achieved a decisive blow, but only a gradual advance, accompanied by partial failures and, in general, enormous losses.

I thus cannot ignore General von Falkenhayn's repeated pressure for a separate arrangement with Russia. The possibilities have at least to be thought through to the end. I have until now seen no signs that Russia is ready for an accommodation. Even another victory by Hindenburg would not, in my view, suffice to make Russia willing. To this end, either we or Austria would probably have to occupy most of Poland. We would probably need this collateral in order to force Russia to pay an indemnity, most of which would then fall to Austria. For its part, the Dual Monarchy would also doubtless claim, in addition to such an indemnity, a part of Serbia and would want to give another part of Serbia to Bulgaria. What will happen to Turkey is not clear to me yet. It will probably end up being an agreement with Russia on the basis of the status quo.

If it were to remain unsuccessful, an initiative from us would be interpreted by the entire Triple Entente as a sign of weakness, and it would destroy any inclinations toward peace in France. General von Falkenhayn is inclined to minimize all these difficulties, although his desire to settle the war-guilt question in our favor probably plays a role.

Source: Aus dem Schreiben des Reichskanzlers Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg an den Unterstaatssekretär im Auswärtigen Amt Arthur Zimmermann vom 19. November 1914 über einen Separatfrieden mit Rußland als Voraussetzung für eine siegreiche Beendigung des Krieges, in André Scherer, et al., eds., *L'Allemagne et les problèmes de la paix pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale. Documents extraits des archives de l'Office allemand des Affaires étrangères*, publiés et annotés par André Scherer et Jacques Grunewald, 4 volumes, Paris, 1962–78, Vol. I: *Des Origines à la déclaration de la guerre sous-marine à outrance (août 1914–31 janvier 1917)*, no. 13, p. 15ff; reprinted in Willibald Gutsche, *Herrschaftsmethoden des deutschen Imperialismus 1897/8 bis 1917*. East Berlin, 1977, pp. 210–11.

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