

# Chancellor Michaelis' Interpretation of the Peace Resolution (July 19, 1917)

## Abstract

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The impending passage of the Peace Resolution was a painful sign to the military leadership of Bethmann Hollweg's (1856–1921) failure. The Kaiser had no choice but to replace him with a candidate more to Ludendorff's liking. He chose Georg Michaelis, a Prussian bureaucrat, who, like Ludendorff, had little sympathy for the majority parties in the *Reichstag*. The new Chancellor's response to the Peace Resolution was intentionally vague, haughty, and defiant. He would support the resolution, he declared, "as I understand it," meaning that he would continue to support a victors' peace.

## Source

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Berlin, July 19, 1917

I come now to what stands at the center of all of our interest, to the core of today's debate. Germany did not want this war. It did not strive for conquests, nor for the forceful increase of its power – therefore *Germany* will not fight a day longer simply to make forceful conquests, if a *peace with honor* is to be had. (Lively applause from the Center, the Progressive People's Party, and the Social Democrats.) What we want is, in the first place, to conclude peace as a party that has successfully achieved its end. The present and future generations shall for centuries recall this time of trial as a shining time of victory, of unprecedented energy and willing sacrifice borne by our people and our armies. A people of fewer than seventy million, which has held its own militarily in front of its frontiers, side-by-side with its allies, against a far superior mass of enemies, has demonstrated its invincibility. (Bravo!) I define our war aims in light of this situation. In the first place, the territory of the Fatherland is inviolable. We cannot negotiate with an enemy who demands territory from us. When we make peace, we must above all secure the *frontiers of the German Empire* for all time. (Lively applause on the right.) By means of *agreements* (Bravo! from the Center, the Progressive People's Party, and the Social Democrats) and compromise (renewed Bravo! from the Center, the Progressive People's Party, and the Social Democrats) we must guarantee the vital interests of the German Empire on the continent and overseas (Lively applause.) Peace must provide the basis for lasting reconciliation among the nations. (Lively applause from the Center, the Progressive People's Party, and the Social Democrats.) As is expressed in your resolution, peace must prevent economic barriers from creating further antagonism among the nations. (Very good.) It must prevent the armed alliance of our enemies from becoming an economic alliance against us. (Very Good! in the Center Party, the Progressive People's Party, and the Social Democrats.) These ends are attainable within the framework of your resolution, as I interpret it. (Bravo! and Very Good! from the Center Party, the Progressive People's Party, and the Social Democrats.) We cannot offer peace again. (Quite right! on the right.) The hand that we sincerely extended met with no response. (Quite right! on the right.) But with the support of the entire nation, and the German army and its leaders, who are in agreement with this declaration (Hear! Hear! – Bravo! from the Center, Left, and Social Democrats), the German government is well aware: if our enemies abandon for their part their appetite for conquest and their intent to subjugate us, and if they wish to enter into negotiations, we shall, in a spirit of sincerity and a desire for peace, listen to what they have to say to us. (Bravo! on the left.) Until then, we must hold out calmly, patiently, and courageously.

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Source: Erklärung Michaelis' zur Friedensresolution im Reichstag, *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, XIII LP, II Sess., vol. 310, pp. 3571–72; reprinted in Wolfdieter Bihl, *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, pp. 297–98.

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