

Civil-Military Tensions: Letter from Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg to Field Marshall von Hindenburg (1917)

Abstract

Here, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg (1856–1921) attempts to impose coordination among the highest levels of the German government, where rivalries had already set in over the prosecution of the war. According to the German constitution, the Kaiser was the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but his influence on strategic decisions was marginal. He was nonetheless the ultimate source of authority, so tensions among civilian and military authorities pivoted on relationships to the Kaiser. Both camps sought to influence him for their own purposes.

Source

It was my honor to receive your letter from the 17th of this month. To my great regret, I see from your letter that my telegram of the 14th aroused sentiments in Your Excellency that I did not wish to evoke and that I also could not have expected, given what I knew of the circumstances. Taking into consideration the enormity of the tasks and responsibilities that rest on Your Excellency's shoulders, I have always attempted to avoid involving either Your Excellency or General Ludendorff in these sorts of affairs and have instead allowed our assistants in charge of special tasks to handle such matters. This is what I attempted to do in this case as well.

The enclosed note by Ministerial Director Deutelmöser concerning his negotiations with the head of the War Press Office will convince Your Excellency that I only decided to send the telegram to Your Excellency on the 14th of this month after the special assistants' handling of this matter produced the result that a statement on the difficult, complex, and dangerous question concerning the boundaries between the military and civilian leadership was to be made against my expressed wishes and without my participation. Your Excellency's letter of March 17th made it clear to me that this procedure is not what Your Excellency wanted, and rather that it was obviously a misunderstanding on the part of a subordinate. On the other hand, I do not doubt that Your Excellency will acknowledge that the situation, insofar as I could understand it, required me to make a direct presentation to Your Excellency.

I would like to take the liberty of discussing two points in Your Excellency's letter in more detail. Your Excellency says that my telegram alleges that Your Excellency is capable of undermining His Majesty's command. I did not intend to suggest anything like this at all. I simply considered it my duty to point out the consequences that were certain to result if the question at hand was opened up to public criticism.

Additionally, the Reichstag members' wish (as conveyed to you in my telegram of September 29, 1916) for Your Excellency to make a personal appearance was rejected by me; I encouraged only the sending of a General Staff Officer for the purpose of passing on actual information concerning the state of the war, such as is usually given by me under reference to Your Excellency. In no way did I want you to account for your actions before the representatives of the people. I immediately recognized that the objections raised by Your Excellency in this regard were thoroughly justified.

Concerning a reply to Mr. Wacker's inquiry: such a response to the questions themselves would have led to a discussion of the most difficult and delicate questions, ones that must remain outside the realm of

public discussion, especially since the response would have been given at a press conference whose membership includes individuals with a greater proclivity toward critical discussion than the receipt of factual information. I have always accepted the desire of Your Excellency to remain outside the realm of political struggles. It is regrettable that efforts to pull Your Excellency into the political struggle and to use the authority of Your Excellency against the civilian leadership constitute a central tactic of the enemies of the civilian leadership in their political struggles. Concerning the answer that is to be given, I would therefore proceed under the assumption that it will avoid a discussion of individual questions and will give the representatives of the press no basis for reflecting upon differences between the Chancellor and the Supreme Army Command. In the version recommended by me, I have assumed all of the political responsibility – as corresponds to the position of the Chancellor according to the constitution. Questions regarding the course of decisions that need to be accounted for, and the extent of the role of the Chancellor (who is politically responsible) and the Supreme Army Command (which is removed from responsibility), must officially remain an internal matter. In determining answers, may I humbly suggest that Your Excellency consider the route I have taken in negotiations between the head of the War Press Office and Director Deutelmöser.

Concerning the letter of Your Excellency from the 19th of this month, I am happy to pass on the wish expressed by Your Excellency therein to the ministers of the respective departments.

Signed

Von Bethmann Hollweg

Source: Letter from Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg to Field Marshall von Hindenburg concerning the Sole Responsibility of the Civilian Leadership to the Public for Political Decisions, March 21, 1917, Homburg, PA Bonn, Political Section. Abt., Foreign Office, Central Headquarters, Bd. 245, Copy; reprinted in Wilhelm Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914–1918*. 2 vols. Düsseldorf, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 682–84.

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