

Erich von Falkenhayn on the Military Situation in Early 1916

Abstract

Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's (1856–1921) notes from a conversation with General Erich von Falkenhayn (1861–1922) reflect the dire military situation in early 1916. Two assumptions that proved false were the efficacy of unrestricted submarine warfare and the inability of the United States to influence the war's outcome. Falkenhayn's search for a viable strategy led shortly thereafter to the battle of Verdun.

Source

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Today General von Falkenhayn explained his view of the situation to me as follows:

Russia

Although the internal situation is bad, there is no prospect of a complete collapse in the near future. The army will not be capable of conducting any *larger* offensive even early in the year. Their worth is illustrated by the fact that the Bessarabian army, formed from the best army corps and fully rested, has not been able to accomplish much against the Austrian troops, who are not particularly good.

France

Internal conditions and morale in the country are not good. Army is good. Its morale is better than a year ago.

England

As is shown by the armed services bill, England is determined to fight this war to the bitter end.

Whether we will be able to successfully carry out an expedition to Salonika remains to be seen.

The expedition is being organized. Whether it will be carried out will be decided on the basis of the condition of the enemy troops at the point at which the expedition could actually begin.

This will be the case – at the earliest – at the end of January.

Not *pro notitia*. The Bulgarians have only been able to defeat a few rear guards of the English and the French near Doirian and were themselves so exhausted after this that they would have been unable to pursue the Entente troops to Salonika. We have been terribly fortunate that we explicitly forbade them to do this, because otherwise a complete catastrophe would have been inevitable.

We are still fully undecided whether we will be able to – or will – conduct a major offensive in the

West. If we do, we do not think it will bring about the end of the war, but there will be a marked turn of the tide in France.

Because of our own economic and internal situation, it is crucial that the war comes to an end before the winter of 1916-17. There is no *certain* prospect that our enemies will be willing to conclude a peace hitherto or that we will be able to force them to conclude a peace by our military attacks. Therefore, *we have* to employ all the military means at our disposal against our enemies. The only and the best tool of this sort is unlimited submarine warfare. We can no longer choose *if* we want to use this tool or not. We are simply forced to use it.

The navy (Admiral von Holtzendorff) assures us that with submarine warfare we will be able to hurt England so badly that within four months, or perhaps a few more, she will give in.

America will break with us diplomatically, but it will not declare war on us. Even if it did declare war on us, the military damage it could do to us is not very substantial. Financially and otherwise America already treats us like an enemy.

Holland and the Scandinavian countries will not even think about declaring war on us. Should they do it after all, we have enough troops to defend ourselves against Holland and Denmark. Sweden will never march against us. Furthermore, our forces are sufficient to prevent England from attempting to land in Holland or Denmark.

The moral impact and the consequences of our even greater seclusion may prove to be regrettable. We have, however, no other choice. We have to use every possible means that offers the chance of overcoming our enemies. We will fight for our existence under all circumstances.

Bethmann Hollweg 7/1/16

Source: Bethmann Hollweg, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Weltkrieg 18 Geheim adh. Ubootkrieg, Bd. 1; reprinted in Karl-Heinz Janssen, *Der Kanzler und der General: Die Führungskrise um Bethmann Hollweg und Falkenhayn 1914-1916*. Göttingen, 1967, pp. 288–89.

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