

Erich von Falkenhayn's "Christmas Memorandum" (December 1915)

Abstract

General Falkenhayn (1861–1922) sets the course for what became Germany's central yet unattainable goal, namely, inflicting so much damage on England that the country would negotiate for an armistice. The strategy of economic strangulation and submarine warfare brought the United States into the war and ensured Germany's defeat.

Source

France has been weakened militarily and economically – through the permanent loss of coal fields in the northwest of the country – almost to the limit of what it can endure. Russia's army has not yet been fully defeated, but its offensive ability has been diminished to such an extent that it will not be able to regain anything like its old strength. Serbia's army can be considered destroyed. Italy has without a doubt recognized that it cannot count on its appetite for spoils being satisfied in the near future and would therefore probably be happy to escape from this adventure in any honorable way possible.

If conclusions are nowhere being drawn from these facts, then this is due to various phenomena, which do not need detailed discussion. There is only one matter – the most important one – that cannot be passed over. That is the incredible pressure that England still exerts on its allies.

[...]

Thus it is all the more important that all the means suitable for harming England in what is properly its own territory are simultaneously brought to ruthless application. These means are submarine warfare and laying the groundwork for a political and economic alliance not only between Germany and its allies, but also between Germany and all those states that are not yet fully constrained within England's sphere of influence. The formation of this alliance is not the topic of this exposition. Solving this task lies solely with the political leadership.

Submarine warfare, however, is a means of warfare just like any other. Those in charge of leading the war effort cannot avoid taking a position on this. [...]

An advance against Moscow would lead us nowhere. We do not have enough strength for any of these enterprises. Thus Russia is not a suitable object for attack. Only France remains. [...]

There are targets lying within reach behind the French section of the Western Front for which the French leadership would need to use their very last man. Should they do this, then France would bleed to death, for there is no retreat, regardless if we ourselves reach the target or not. Should they not do this, and should these targets fall into our hands, then the effect on morale in France would be enormous. For these operations, which are limited in terms of territory, Germany will not be compelled to expend itself to a degree that would leave it seriously exposed on other fronts. Germany can confidently await the relief operations that can be expected at these fronts – and, indeed, hope to have enough forces available to meet the attacks with counterstrikes. For Germany can conduct the offensive quickly or slowly, break off the offensive for a period of time or strengthen the offensive, according to its objectives.

The targets in question are Belfort and Verdun. What was said above applies to both of them. All the

same, Verdun is to be preferred.

Source: Erich von Falkenhayn, "Christmas Memorandum" (December 1915), in *Die Oberste Heeresleitung 1915–1916 in ihren wichtigsten Entschlüssen*. Berlin, 1920, pp. 176 ff; reprinted in Willibald Gutsche, *Herrschaftsmethoden des deutschen Imperialismus 1897/8 bis 1917*. East Berlin, 1977, pp. 252–53.

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