

Philipp Scheidemann's Reichstag Speech Demanding Peace (May 5, 1917)

Abstract

In this now famous speech, delivered in the Reichstag by SPD delegate Philipp Scheidemann (1865-1939) on May 15, 1917, he calls for a negotiated peace without annexations. In doing so, he opposed both the Supreme Army Command and the demands of the right-wing nationalist Pan-German League [*Alldeutscher Verband*], which at that time was still calling for the war to continue until Germany had realized its expansionist war aims by a “peace through victory” [*Siegfrieden*]. During a meeting at the Army Command Headquarters on April 23, 1917, Hindenburg and Ludendorff had pressured Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg to have the government officially formulate and publicize Germany's war aims, including annexations of territories in Belgium, France, and Russia. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg refused to do so, however.

In his speech, Scheidemann referred to the efforts of both the Austrian and the provisional Russian governments, both of whom had separately attempted to negotiate a peace agreement without annexations, a return to the *status quo ante bellum*, with the Entente in early 1917. Like all peace initiatives during the First World War, however, these came to nothing, and Scheidemann's prediction that Kaiser Wilhelm's government would provoke a revolution by disregarding the will of the war-weary German people was to prove true. This recording was not made in the Reichstag, however, but it is a studio recording made in 1920 by the Prussian State Library. Scheidemann, a talented orator who had made history in the intervening years by proclaiming the German republic and serving as its first minister president, re-read an excerpt from his speech for the recording.

Source

Gentlemen, on both sides, the suffering populace is being fobbed off with promises that the final decision is imminent and that it is only necessary to be patient for a little while longer. Almost three years have passed. Again and again, both sides say: soon.

I consider it the duty of all clear-thinking and level-headed people in all countries to expose this game that is being played with the lives of nations. To cry out to the governments of all countries: enough is enough! Every man with a sense of responsibility and conscience should ask himself whether it is tolerable to send hundreds of thousands more to the slaughter for a goal, a goal of conquest, which the overwhelming majority of our people do not want at all, and which cannot be achieved anyway.

I repeat, gentlemen, what I have been saying for years: it would be a blessing for the whole of Europe if we could negotiate a peace through diplomacy as quickly as possible. The people will and must stand up for the defense of our country, for the defense of their homes and hearths. But our people want nothing to do with waging war for any kind of tyrannical aims!

We Social Democrats will oppose this most resolutely—make no mistake about that. The Pan-Germans deride the diplomatic peace for which we have all stood up as a peace of renunciation, as deputy Rösicke mocked it. What does that mean? And what are we renouncing anyway? We are renouncing the continuation of this war. We are renouncing hundreds of thousands of dead and hundreds of thousands of cripples. We are renouncing daily financial burdens of hundreds of millions. We are renouncing the

further devastation of Europe. But we are not giving up a single piece of German land or a single piece of German property.

We are merely renouncing what we do not possess. We are also renouncing the illusion that the war will bring us gains that we have no right to, for which we would have to make further terrible sacrifices and which we would not achieve anyway. We are renouncing the violation and oppression of other peoples.

But we do not renounce the German people emerging from this terrible war as a free people. The Pan-Germans call this a peace of renunciation. What we renounce are the Pan-Germans and their stupid chatter. Two governments, one hostile and one allied, have taken a position which we also wish to be the position of the German government.

I ask the Reich Chancellor whether he intends to raise his conquering fist against a liberated people guided by the principles of freedom and international justice. I ask the Reich Chancellor whether, at this fateful moment in world history, he intends to separate himself from the overwhelming majority of his own people and from his ally, the Austro-Hungarian government.

I will be quite frank: what holds the German people together, despite all their internal differences, is their common intention to repel foreign attacks on German territory and German property. What separates the vast majority from a section of the ruling classes, the imperialists and those who behave like them, is their disagreement on the internal and external aims of the war.

If the clamp fails to hold and what remains is the wedge, then the two parts will fall apart helplessly. This means that if the English and French governments were to renounce annexations today, as the Russian government has already done, and if the German government were to continue its conquest instead of ending the war by renouncing annexations, then, gentlemen, you can be sure that we will have a revolution in this country!

Source: Philipp Scheidemann, Reichstag speech, May 15, 1917. Recording date: January 9, 1920.
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