

The German “Peace Offer” (December 5, 1916)

Abstract

Although their armies were locked in combat, the belligerent sides remained in almost constant diplomatic contact throughout the war. The most important prelude to the flurry of activity in 1917 was the Central Power's public offer to negotiate in December 1916. Basking in the glow of victory in Romania, the offer was both ambiguous and arrogant in tone. It produced only skepticism in the allied camp, and its failure eased the way towards the German decision in favor of unrestricted submarine warfare.

Source

Should our enemies refuse to enter peace negotiations – and we have to assume that this will be the case – the odium of continuing the war will fall on them. War-weariness [...] will then grow and generate new support for the elements that are pushing for peace. In Germany and among its Allies, too, the desire for peace has become keen. The rejection of our peace offer, the knowledge that the continuation of the struggle is inevitable thanks alone to our enemies, would be an effective means of spurring our people to utmost exertion and sacrifice for a victorious end to the war.

Source: Aus der „ausschließlich persönlichen, streng vertraulichen Information“ des Reichskanzlers Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg an den preußischen Gesandten in Karlsruhe Karl von Eisendecher vom 5. Dezember 1916 über den Zweck des Friedensangebotes der Mittelmächte. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Nachlaß Eisendecher, no. 1/8; reprinted in Willibald Gutsche, *Herrschaftsmethoden des deutschen Imperialismus 1897/8 bis 1917* [*The Ruling Methods of German Imperialism, 1897/8 to 1917*]. East Berlin, 1977, pp. 272-73.

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