

The September Memorandum (September 9, 1914)

Abstract

Bethmann Hollweg (1856–1921) managed the precarious domestic consensus on the war through the art of evasion. He parried entreaties from proponents of conflicting positions and vaguely sought to assure those in favor of a moderate peace and constitutional reform of his support. He sympathized in private with the idea of large-scale annexations, but public statements to this effect were impossible. This memorandum, which advocated breathtaking annexations, originated in the Chancellor's own office in the summer of 1914. Historians have used it as evidence that Bethmann Hollweg planned the war to achieve German hegemony in Europe.

Source

Berlin, September 9, 1914

1. *France*. The military authorities are to judge whether the annexation of Belfort, the western slopes of the Vosges, the demolition of the fortresses, and the annexation of the coastline from Dunkirk to Boulogne is to be demanded.

In all events, because it is necessary for our industry's iron-ore production, the basin of Briey is to be annexed.

Furthermore, a war indemnity, to be paid in installments. It is to be so high that France will be unable in the next 18 to 20 years to expend major sums on armaments.

In addition: a commercial treaty that makes France economically dependent on Germany, transforms it into our export market, and enables it to exclude English commerce from France. This commercial treaty must secure financial and industrial freedom of movement for us in France – so German firms can no longer be treated differently from French firms.

2. *Belgium*. Incorporation of Liege and Verviers into Prussia, a border strip of the Belgian province of Luxembourg to the Kingdom Luxembourg.

It remains questionable whether Antwerp, along with an access route to Liege, is also to be annexed.

Whatever the case, Belgium must in all events – even should it continue to exist as a state – sink to the status of a vassal state; it must cede occupation rights in militarily significant ports; place its coasts at our disposal; become economically a German province. Given such a solution, which has the advantages of annexation without the domestic political disadvantages, Fr[ench] Flanders, along with Dunkirk, Calais, and Boulogne, with their largely Flemish population, can be handed over, as is, to Belgium without any danger. The competent agencies will have to evaluate the military value of this position vis-à-vis England.

3. *Luxembourg*. Will become a German federal state and will receive a strip from the present Belgian province of Luxembourg and possibly the corner of Longwy.

4. A *central European economic association* is to be constructed through common customs agreements, to comprise France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Poland (!) and possibly Italy, Sweden, and Norway. This association will probably have no common constitutional head and will provide for

ostensible equality among its members, although it will in fact be under German leadership; it must stabilize Germany's economic predominance in central Europe.

5. The *question of colonial acquisitions*, above all the creation of a contiguous central African colonial empire, will be considered later; so will the question of German goals vis-à-vis Russia.

As the foundation for economic arrangements with France and Belgium, a short, provisional formula for a possible preliminary peace is to be found.

6. *Holland*. Means and measures should be considered by which Holland can be brought into closer association with the German Empire.

In view of the Dutch character, this closer association must be free of any sense of coercion; it must not alter the Dutch way of life, nor change Dutch military obligations. It will thus leave Holland ostensibly independent but in fact dependent upon us. Perhaps an alliance that extends to the colonies, in any case a close customs union, possibly the incorporation of Antwerp into Holland might be considered, in return for their granting Germany the right to keep troops in the fortress of Antwerp as well as at the mouth of the Schelde.

Source: Bethmann Hollweg Denkschrift, September 9, 1914, Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde, Reichskanzlei, Grosses Hauptquartier 21, No. 2476; reprinted in Wolfdieter Bihl, *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, pp. 61–62.

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