

# The Third Supreme Command and German War Aims (May 11, 1918)

## Abstract

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During the last two years of the war, the debates on war aims and domestic political reform associated a compromise peace with the end of a semi-authoritarian constitutional system. In the eyes of its leaders at least, Germany had entered and prosecuted the war in order to maintain the old order, which was now under attack from within. The decision to pursue a compromise peace thus lay in the hands of the German leadership, the representatives of classes whose power and privilege would have been sacrificed in compromise but validated in victory. The military victories in the south and the east had buoyed German spirits at the close of 1917 and raised prospects of a triumphant end to the war in 1918. The eastern victories seemed to offer an opportunity to win in the west, before the anticipated arrival of the Americans in late 1918. Here, we see members of the Supreme Command discuss the precarious situation of the Central Powers in May 1918, after the Ludendorff Offensive had failed to turn the tide on the western front.

## Source

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[Spa, May 11, 1918]

The Chancellor opens the conference by explaining that the upcoming meeting between the two monarchs in Spa is to be used to lay the foundation for renewing the alliance with Austria-Hungary. He reads the draft of an agreement between the two monarchs and explains that it seems advisable to put the political alliance at the top of the agenda.

General Ludendorff agrees.

State Secretary von Kühlmann thinks that one has to agree immediately about the duration of the alliance. Twenty years appear appropriate to him. The negotiations that regulate relations between Austria and Hungary usually cover a period of 20 years. He cannot recommend a shorter period, since it is now essential to demonstrate both to the domestic population and the rest of the world that Austria-Hungary is willing and compelled to remain on Germany's side. A period shorter than fifteen years is probably out of the question, because no economic alliance can be envisaged for less than fifteen years.

General Ludendorff is of the opinion that twenty years is probably too short a period.

State Secretary von Kühlmann also approves of a longer period of time and adds that the relationship between the two empires should also be subject to termination at the discretion of each party.

Ambassador Graf Wedel remarks that Graf Czernin has been thinking of a period of thirty years for the alliance, whereas Kaiser Karl had once spoken out in favor of 25 years.

The Chancellor concludes that general agreement reigns on this issue and that a final decision about the duration of the alliance can be reserved for discussions between the ministers.

At this point the question of the military alliance comes up for discussion.

Field Marshall von Hindenburg explains that he is not in favor of too close a military alliance, because he

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does not trust Austro-Hungarian policy. He is skeptical about exchanging officers. One can hardly expect German officers to spend several years of their lives in Galicia, in social conditions that are not very pleasant.

General Ludendorff explains in this connection that Germany has suffered from the lack of a military alliance with Austria-Hungary. As a consequence, the German side has avoided pressing for an improvement of the Austro-Hungarian army. It is well known that the armaments of the allied army have been insufficient, particularly in artillery. Germany has made the great sacrifices; Austria-Hungary by contrast only minor sacrifices. Thus, the alliance has eased the burdens on Austria-Hungary but created additional burdens on Germany. Given this fact, a military alliance is necessary. The most important demands appear to him to be: the reorganization of the Austro-Hungarian army, introduction of standardized armaments, uniform tactical and strategic training, and (as the General later added) standardization in building the railroad network and in providing and distributing equipment. The fact that the Austro-Hungarians cannot be relied on to keep the most essential military secrets is highly objectionable. Certain well-known cases have revealed that there are traitors in the Austro-Hungarian army. Close military co-operation between two empires is only possible if each is informed about the deployment of the other's forces. Until now, this has not been the case in our relationship with Austria-Hungary; it must, however, be the goal. The military alliance will therefore have to cover this matter. But one must of course also be certain that the other party is nationally secure. Here the question is how the Austro-Hungarian army will be organized. Will the Austrian and Hungarian contingents be separated? Will one have to conclude agreements with Austria-Hungary or with Austria and Hungary?

Field Marshall von Hindenburg remarks that he does not believe the upcoming meeting of the monarchs will get into the specifics. It will probably be limited to establishing general principles.

General Ludendorff explains further that the term "military alliance" means nothing yet. The individual agreement on which this alliance is to be based still has to be determined. The General then reads a memorandum drafted by General von Cramon, in which the demands to be addressed in a military alliance are summarized in seven points. Ludendorff notes that these points need to be negotiated; otherwise the concept of a military alliance is too flexible.

General von Cramon is of the opinion that Kaiser Karl and General von Arz must explain how they envisage the separation of the [Austro-Hungarian] armies. He has the impression that the Austro-Hungarian leadership is not disposed to go very far with this separation.

General Ludendorff emphasizes once again that Germany has to know with whom it is concluding this alliance. In any case, Germany is the party that is making the commitments.

General von Cramon believes that merely introducing Hungarian as a language of command will make things more difficult.

State Secretary von Kühlmann informs the meeting that Graf Czernin thinks that German will no longer be the language of command. The Minister does not, however, think that this is of great importance, because, as the language of command, German is already limited to about sixty words and has played no major role. Graf Czernin also believes that the separation of the Austrian and Hungarian contingents is probable. However, he emphasizes that a common General Staff will be retained.

General Ludendorff is of the opinion that the military alliance, should it be concluded with two parties, will be significantly weaker. Should it come to a separation of the officer corps, which until now has represented a unified national element, the break between the two halves of the monarchy will be much deeper than it has been until now.

Field Marshall von Hindenburg notes that it will suffice in any case if the upcoming meeting of the

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monarchs discusses General von Cramon's seven points.

The Chancellor adds in closing that the most important question appears to be whether the military alliance is to be concluded with one or two parties. For the rest, he will, of course, yield in this area to the expert judgment of the military leadership.

The conference turns now to the question of economic union.

The Chancellor begins by explaining that the Polish question is closely intertwined with this economic problem. One can even say that the Polish question is becoming a purely economic question. It will, however, be inappropriate to feature the Polish question in the upcoming discussions. Agreement on the Polish question has therefore been put into the draft treaty as a prerequisite for reaching agreement on the other points. He believes that there is agreement on the general desire among leading German agencies to abandon the Austro-Polish solution. It is not possible to clarify what Poland itself thinks. Sometimes it seems as if Poland inclines toward the Austro-Polish solution, sometimes the opposite appears to be the case. It will depend on a decision of both monarchs.

Ambassador Graf Wedel thinks that Baron Burian strongly endorses the Austro-Polish solution.

Field Marshall von Hindenburg believes that resolving the Polish question at the upcoming meeting is highly recommendable in order to avoid having to start all over again on every occasion and to achieve clarity on the issue at last.

General Ludendorff agrees with him and adds that from a strictly military standpoint, there is strong interest in seeing the Austro-Polish solution fail. In his eyes, the alliance that is being now considered will grow a lot in significance and force if one abandons the Austro-Polish idea. Shall Germany conclude a military alliance with an Austrian Poland as well?

The Chancellor remarks that it will be a heavy imposition on Kaiser Karl if one were to demand that the upcoming negotiations commence with Austria's waiving its claims to Poland.

General Ludendorff explains that it was agreed at one time that Germany should annex Poland, while Austria was to have a free hand in Romania. Subsequently, the opposite was agreed; in return for giving up Poland, Germany could incorporate Romania politically and economically. This resolution was not incorporated into the Romanian peace, so the basis for the Austro-Polish solution disappeared. Had the Romanian peace in fact been concluded as one had envisaged in the agreement just mentioned, he could not oppose the Austro-Polish solution, as this would be disloyal. However, under the present conditions, Germany cannot be accused of disloyalty if it no longer considers itself bound by the Austro-Polish solution. Therefore it should also not be difficult for Kaiser Karl to agree to abandon the Austro-Polish solution.

Field Marshall von Hindenburg emphasizes that the moment is extraordinarily favorable. It has to be exploited.

General von Cramon is of the opinion that Kaiser Karl is not so very partial to the Austro-Polish solution either.

The Chancellor explains that the negotiations must deal with the three points – that is, with the political, the military, and the economic union, and only then may the Polish problem be broached. The negotiations must be conducted along the lines proposed in the draft that he has read out.

General Ludendorff repeats once again that he is very much in favor of a military and political alliance with Austria-Hungary, if the Austro-Polish solution is abandoned. Furthermore, General von Arz is no

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friend of the Austro-Polish solution.

State Secretary von Kühlmann remarks if one wishes to abandon the Austro-Polish solution, one must at least know which alternative solution one prefers in its place. One has spoken of a so-called “candidate solution.” However, it is by no means clear what one is to understand by this term.

On the question of economic union, the Chancellor explains further that the planned linkage with Austria-Hungary is to be as tight-knit as possible. A direct customs union appears to be difficult, because of widespread opposition to it in Germany.

State Secretary von Kühlmann suggests that the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador Prince Hohenlohe be informed of the suggestions that are being prepared for submission to Austria-Hungary at the meeting of the monarchs. This step is necessary so that he might inform Baron Burian before the meeting.

Field Marshall von Hindenburg supported the idea of making public General [von] Cramon’s seven points. As a result, it is agreed that the seven points be appended to the draft.

*Finland.*

Chancellor: the next point has to do with our war aims in the east. The gentlemen here are acquainted with the negotiations that are being conducted in the parliamentary committee. His Excellency von Payer has given a very good speech, but the deputies are continually asking about the details.

His Excellency Ludendorff: As I already made known through Colonel von Winterfeldt, Finland is finished. Only Fort Ino remains in Finnish hands. For the rest, our leaders have received orders to see that the Finnish army is trained along German lines. The desire to move into Finland sprang from the idea of winning an ally against Russia. The White Guard is too weak. Therefore we have met Mannerheim’s desire for help in raising capable troops.

Chancellor: How many troops are there?

His Excellency Ludendorff: Never more than a few; all told 10 battalions, 6 batteries. These troops are staying there because we have an interest in strengthening the Finnish army.

Chancellor: The opinion has been expressed that we are committing forces to the support of the troops of General Mannerheim, who intends to march against Russia.

His Excellency Ludendorff: I know nothing about it. We sent German troops to Finland to strengthen the Finnish army and to gain an ally in Finland. I have no reason to suppose that anyone is thinking about marching on Petersburg. Nor do I believe that the Russo-Finnish border has been crossed anywhere. I also do not believe that Mannerheim is going to do so. It is possible that he aims to go into East Karelia. According to information that I have from the F[oreign] O[ffice], the Foreign Office approves of Finnish expansion in the direction of the Murman Coast. (Ludendorff explains on the map.) There the English are in charge. The Finnish want the East Karelians to join them. At the moment it is not clear what the Finns are up to, that is to say, how far they want to go. Our only interest is that the English do not establish themselves on the Murman Coast.

Chancellor: Do the Germans intend to cooperate?

His Excellency Ludendorff: No!

In the Ukraine we have been operating according to the principles of the *bread peace* [*Brotfriedens*]. (Ludendorff explains on a map.) Originally we wanted to go only as far as Kharkov. The reason why we had to continue our advance through the Ukraine has to do with coal. We could not find enough coal for

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our trains. We thus imported 80,000 tons of coal a month into the Ukraine. This is a heavy burden on our trains; therefore, we had to take possession of the coal basins of Donez, which also still belong to the Ukraine. We proceeded beyond the eastern frontier of the Ukraine in order to secure the coal fields against attacks by the Bolsheviks. At present we have halted and ceased operations. We are in contact with several Russian leaders; a demarcation line is being drawn. We have achieved the goals we had to achieve.

The situation is the same in the Crimea. We moved in there in order to secure shipping in the Black Sea. This goal has been achieved, except that two large Russian warships have escaped. His Excellency von der Bussche has already spoken with Joffe about how we are to proceed with respect to these ships. If the ships return to Sebastopol on their own free will, we will be finished in the Crimea as well. If not, we may have to advance up to Noworossisk, where both ships have taken refuge. Otherwise, I believe that we have achieved everything that the Supreme Command had in mind. Militarily we are through.

The Polish corps is making trouble. Of the three that are in the Ukraine, the Second and Third were initially unreliable. Therefore, the order was given to disarm these corps. Now, however, at the request of His Excellency von Beseler, who communicated his wish to me by telegraph, the First Corps is to be disarmed as well, because its leaders have not held to the agreements. The Don Cossacks and the Donez Cossacks have expressed the wish to be attached to the Ukraine, which I wholeheartedly support, since the Ukraine is the only viable state structure in the east.

*Transcaucasus:* The English regard themselves as the masters in Persia. (L[udendorff] recommends having Captain Niedermayer give a lecture to the Chancellor in this connection, and he explains further on a map.) Persia is, so to speak, already an English province. Perhaps there will be an opportunity here, too, to defeat the English some day. A telegram from Zeki Pascha asks us not to make difficulties for the Turks when they take possession of the railway line to Tschulfa. German troops are not going to be used here. The only German troops are at the Jordan.

Should we later undertake a campaign in Persia, we would do it in order to strike at England, not to make conquests. At present we have no troops available for this effort. Therefore it is all the more important that the Turks do it – all the more important not to make any difficulties for their occupation of the railway line. Lossow's draft contemplates transferring a part of Transcaucasus to Persia; this would in truth represent only a transfer to England. I would therefore like to warn against German-Persian cooperation. I think that the much-vetted idea is wrong that we can achieve anything in Persia. In my view, the best thing would be to send the Turks in the direction of Teheran. On the other hand, the Turks should not be allowed to expand too far toward the Caucasus. Therefore, I am also opposed to the Turks' having control over the railway line from Baku to Batum, if only because of the Georgians, who are our friends and a Christian people.

We should somehow take up contact with the Transcaucasian Republic. How should this contact be set up?

His Excellency von Kühlmann: Our representatives there are Graf Schulenburg and Mr. v. Wesendonk, who have the necessary knowledge and full comprehension of the situation. On the question of transferring a part of Transcaucasus to Persia – what reasons do we have for doing so?

His Excellency Ludendorff: In Berlin, as I have heard, German-Persian cooperation is being pursued. (His Excellency v. Hentig) I oppose this policy and am therefore in favor of leaving the Turks a way open to Persia.

His Excellency von Kühlmann: For my part, I place no value in transferring the areas in question to Persia.

Chancellor: I am guided constantly by the thought that we cannot fight indefinitely.

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His Excellency Ludendorff: We are not and we do not want to. What we are doing down there in Persia is directed against England.

Chancellor: Does England still have troops down there?

Field Marshall: About 20,000 men.

His Excellency von Kühlmann: From a political standpoint I have nothing against giving the Turks a free hand, if we can say that it is purely a Turkish undertaking against Persia.

His Excellency Ludendorff: It could, however, someday become a German-English affair. Right now we do not have the troops for it. In principle, however, I would not consider it to be a misfortune to send several battalions down there.

Field Marshall: It is just a question of small forces, primarily technical troops, etc.

Chancellor: The danger of new military complications will always be present. The war will only be prolonged.

Field Marshall: Quite the contrary; the end of the war will be accelerated.

His Excellency Ludendorff: We are not fighting a new enemy, but an old one (think about Finland). Persia is a completely impotent country – entirely in foreign hands.

Chancellor: I am thinking less about new dangers than about new financial burdens.

His Excellency Ludendorff: I admit they exist.

Field Marshall: But the war will end more quickly, so the financial burdens will not be greater.

His Excellency Ludendorff: Whether the troops fight here or there makes no difference. I hope there will also be financial relief (mineral resources) from Transcaucasus.

Chancellor: Up until now, peace in the east has brought us no financial relief. I must be convinced that we are taking the right actions. Then I shall answer for them to the Reichstag.

His Excellency Ludendorff: At present we are not thinking about military activity in the Orient, but perhaps later.

His Excellency von Kühlmann: Are there any objections to a confidential notice to the leaders of the political parties that the military enterprises discussed today in no case entail more than a very small number of German troops?

His Excellency Ludendorff: No.

The Field Marshall returns once again to the Polish question and for this purpose pulls out a map and points to the very narrow swath of land to the north of Poland, which is available to Germany as a line of communication in case of war. Therefore, even if we achieve the solution to the Polish question that we hope to, the border strip must be extended far enough that we control an additional route for the deployment of our troops.

His Excellency Ludendorff: Another question. How is the business with the grain stand in Austria? There have been apologies to be sure, but no guarantee against a recurrence. I must insist on the dismissal of General Landwehr.

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Chancellor: This has been taken care of; it had to be – if only because of public opinion.

His Excellency von Kühlmann: Prince Hohenlohe has been asked to discuss the Landwehr issue tomorrow in the train with Kaiser Karl.

His Excellency Ludendorff: I do not understand how we can help the Austrians out with grain, about which negotiations are supposed to be going on in Berlin right now. The bread ration at the front can not be reduced. At home, by contrast, the bread ration is to be reduced in any event in June. How can we help Austria in these circumstances? The situation in Austria appears to vary significantly by region. At any rate, it is not bad everywhere. On the 17<sup>th</sup> Austria is supposed to be at the end of its foodstuffs once again. Hungary still has supplies, but Austria does not dare to take them and prefers to take German supplies.

His Excellency von Kühlmann speaks of German controls, such as Burian has suggested.

His Excellency Ludendorff: How is one to understand this in practical terms? The situation has been made much more difficult because of the dual administration in the Ukraine, where Austria is conducting an anti-German policy. I recall the business about the locomotives and Austria's sales of wood to Switzerland.

Chancellor: All these things must be discussed in the upcoming negotiations in Austria.

Field Marshall: I would like to suggest that we meet again on Monday to discuss further points.

Chancellor: Agreed. I hereby close this meeting.

Source: Unsigniertes und undatiertes Protokoll einer Sitzung Reichskanzler - OHL in Spa am 11. Mai 1918, in André Scherer, et al, eds., *L'Allemagne et les problèmes de la paix pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale. Documents extraits des archives de l'Office allemand des Affaires étrangères*, publiés et annotés par André Scherer et Jacques Grunewald, 4 volumes, Paris, 1962–78. Vol. 4, No. 112; reprinted in Wolfdieter Bihl, *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, pp. 412–21.

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