

Unrestricted Submarine Warfare (December 22, 1916)

Abstract

This document from Admiral von Holtzendorff (1853–1919) reveals the calculations behind the decision for unrestricted submarine warfare. Above all, the precarious state of world grain markets and England's dependence on food imports underlay his assumption that the country could be forced to sue for peace. The German leadership reckoned with American entry but calculated that this assistance would come too late.

Source

Top Secret

Berlin, December 22, 1916

I have the most humble honor of sending Your Excellency the enclosed memorandum concerning the necessity of beginning unlimited submarine warfare as soon as possible. This memorandum essentially develops the ideas already expressed in the memorandum "Shipping Capacity and the Provisioning of England in 1916" (with B. No. 22 247 I of August 27, 1916), which was also sent to Your Excellency.

Based on the detailed arguments in the enclosed document, I would ask Your Excellency to follow the train of thought expressed below. I hope that we will reach a complete agreement concerning the fact that it is absolutely necessary to increase our activity against England's maritime traffic to the greatest possible extent, and as soon as possible, in order to take advantage of the favorable conditions and to secure a quick victory.

I.

If the war is not to end in the general exhaustion of all parties, and thus disastrously for us, we need a decision before autumn 1917. Among our enemies, Italy's and France's economies have been shaken so badly that they are only being kept alive by England's energy and enterprise. If we were to break England's backbone, then the war would immediately be decided in our favor. England's backbone is its shipping, which brings to the islands of Great Britain the imports necessary to maintain daily life and the war industries, and which ensures its solvency abroad.

II.

The present state of their shipping capacity, which was described in detail in the previously mentioned letter of August 27, is described again in the enclosed document. In short, it is as follows:

The amount of freight being transported has increased enormously in a whole series of important areas, in some areas it is ten times more than what it was before. From numerous other sorts of evidence we also know with certainty that there is a lack of freight capacity everywhere.

The amount of English tonnage still available can be assumed, correctly, to be about 20 million gross register tons. Of these, at least 8.6 million tons are requisitioned for military purposes, and half a million tons are employed in coastal shipping. It is estimated that one million tons are being repaired or are temporarily out of commission. Approximately two million tons have to be made available to the Allies for transport, so that there are at most eight million tons of English tonnage available. A calculation of the maritime traffic in English ports produces an even smaller number. According to this, from July to

September 1916 only around 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ million gross register tons of English shipping space were in transport to or from England. Alongside this, non-English shipping space in transport to or from England can be calculated to be about 900,000 tons of enemy tonnage (non-English) and more than 3 million tons of neutral tonnage. All total, England is supplied by only around 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ million gross register tons.

III.

If the work previously done in the battle against shipping capacity allows us to believe that further action along these lines has a good chance of success, then the unusually dire shortfall in this year's harvest in bread grains and animal feedstuff throughout the world has provided us with a unique chance. Failing to take advantage of it would be irresponsible. Starting in February, North America and Canada will probably no longer be able to ship any grain to England. England's supplies will have to come on the long path from Argentina and, insofar as Argentina will not be able to supply very much on account of its own bad harvest, from India, and, above all, from Australia. The enclosed document shows in detail that such an extension of the shipping path requires an increase in tonnage of 720,000 tons of freight for grains. Practically speaking, this means that beginning in August 1917, of the 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ million tons available, $\frac{3}{4}$ million will have to be used for purposes previously unnecessary.

IV.

Given such auspicious preconditions, a strong hit against English shipping, conducted with all our energy and with all our power, promises to be a guaranteed success, so I can only repeat my statement of August 27, 1916: "our task in this war, which we can clearly see, is to bring about a decision in our favor by destroying transportation capacity" and "from a military standpoint it is irresponsible not to use the submarine weapon even now." I am not afraid of saying that, given the way things now stand, with unlimited submarine warfare we can force England to sue for peace in five months. This, however, applies only to unlimited submarine warfare; it does not apply to the present submarine warfare against cruisers, even if the submarines were allowed to sink all armed ships.

V.

Based on the assumption – already mentioned – of a monthly destruction of 600,000 tons of shipping space by unlimited submarine warfare and on the expectation – described in the enclosed document – that through unlimited submarine warfare at least two-fifths of neutral shipping will be scared away from travelling to England at all, we can calculate that after five months English sea traffic will have been reduced to approximately 39% of the present amount. England would not be able to tolerate this, neither in regard to its expected condition after the war nor in regard to the possibility of continuing the war. Today, England is already facing a shortage of foodstuffs, which is forcing it to attempt to introduce the very same measures to extend its supplies that we, as a blockaded country, were compelled to adopt in the course of this war. The preconditions for such an organization in England are completely different, that is to say, incomparably worse. England lacks the officials, the authorities, and has not educated its people to fall into line and to accept such constraints. And there is another reason why the proportional and uniform reduction of the bread ration for the population as a whole can no longer be carried out in England. In Germany this reduction was possible at a time when other foodstuffs were temporarily available to offset the sudden decrease in the bread ration. This moment has passed in England and cannot be brought back. With only approximately three-fifths of the maritime traffic, the supply of foodstuffs cannot be sustained without a proportionally strong rationing of the consumption of bread grains if the war industries are to be maintained at the same time. The argument against this, that England might have enough grain and raw materials in its own country to get through the dangerous period until the next harvest, is refuted in detail in the enclosed document.

On top of this, unlimited submarine warfare would mean that England would no longer be supplied by

Denmark and Holland, which would cause an immediate shortage of fats, as one-third of all the butter that England imports comes from Denmark and all of the margarine is imported from Holland. Furthermore, this would mean an intensification of the scarcity of iron ore and wood by threatening the importation of iron and wood from Scandinavia, and would at the same time improve our ability to seize Spanish iron ore imports. With this, coal mining would be directly affected and decreased, as the wood that is necessary for it would not be available. Furthermore, the production of iron and steel would be reduced, as would munitions production as it depends on both. To conclude, this finally gives us the opportunity, which we have so long desired, of doing something effective against the import of neutral munitions, and in so doing to make things easier for our army.

In contrast, five months of submarine warfare against cruisers would bring about a decrease in tonnage to England of only 5 x 400,000 tons, even if submarines were allowed to sink all armed ships. This is approximately 18% of the present monthly maritime traffic, that is to say, less than half of what would be accomplished by unlimited submarine warfare. Based on our previous experiences, allowing submarines to sink all armed ships would probably not bring about a considerable increase in sunken freight tonnage in comparison with the approximately 400,000 tons achieved in the last two months. In all probability, it would only compensate for the decline that is to be otherwise expected as a result of the continuing arming of ships. Of course, even the removal of about one-fifth of the present English maritime traffic would have a very disturbing effect on the provisioning of England. I can rule out the possibility, however, that an England under the utterly determined present leadership of Lloyd George would be led by this to sue for peace, especially as the effects of the scarcity of fat, wood, and ore, as mentioned above, and the sustained impact on the supply of munitions would not occur. Moreover, the psychological effects of panic and horror would not set in. These effects, which are to be obtained only from unlimited submarine warfare, are, I think, an indispensable precondition for success. How important they are is shown by the experiences we had with submarine warfare at the beginning of 1915, when the English still believed in its seriousness and even in the short submarine warfare of March and April 1916.

Another precondition for success is that the beginning and the announcement of unlimited submarine warfare must coincide in such a way that leaves no time for negotiations, especially between England and the neutral nations. Only in this case will a holy fear be put into the enemy and the neutral nations.

VI.

Announcing unlimited submarine warfare will once again force the government of the United States to answer the question of whether or not it wants to act on the position it has taken on submarine warfare up until now. I am very much of the opinion that war with America is such a serious matter that everything must be done to avoid it. In my opinion, however, the aversion to this break must not lead us to shrink from using, in the decisive moment, the weapon that promises us victory.

In any case, one should plan for the worst and get a picture of the influence America's joining our enemies would have on the course of the war. In regard to shipping capacity, this influence can only be very small. It is not to be expected that more than a small percentage of the tonnage of Germany and its Allies in American or other neutral harbors could be quickly put into service for the trip to England. By far the largest part could be damaged in such way that it would not be able to travel in the first months. The preparations for this have been taken. There would also be no crews for these ships at first. Just as little decisive impact can be attached to American troops – who, on account of limited freight capacity, cannot be brought over in considerable numbers – and American money, which cannot make up for insufficient technical supplies and tonnage. The only remaining question is how America would respond to a peace such as England would be required to make. It is unlikely that America will then decide to continue to fight us alone, as America will have no means with which to harm us significantly, whereas its ocean traffic will be damaged by our submarines. On the contrary, it is to be expected that America will join

England in signing the peace treaty in order to return its economy to a healthy state.

I therefore conclude that an unrestricted submarine warfare initiated soon enough to bring about peace before the world harvest in summer 1917 – that is, before August 1 – must hazard the consequences of a break with America, for no other choice remains to us. Despite the danger of a break with America, unlimited submarine warfare, begun soon, is the right means for ending the war successfully. It is also the only means to reach this goal.

VII.

Since the fall of 1916, when I declared that the moment had arrived to strike against England, our situation has fundamentally improved. The shortage in the world's harvest, combined with the effect of the war on England, has once again given us the opportunity to bring about a decision in our favor before the next harvest. If we do not use this opportunity, which according to my calculations will be our last, then I do not see any possibility other than that of mutual exhaustion.

In order to achieve the necessary effect in time, unlimited submarine warfare must begin no later than February 1st. From Your Excellency I request a statement explaining whether the military situation on the continent, especially vis-à-vis those nations which are still neutral, will allow this. I require three weeks for the necessary preparations.

Source: Admiral von Holtzendorff to Field Marshall von Hindenburg (December 22, 1916), reprinted in Herbert Michaelis and Ernst Schraepfer, eds., *Ursachen und Folgen: vom deutschen Zusammenbruch 1918 und 1945 bis zur staatlichen Neuordnung Deutschlands in der Gegenwart; eine Urkunden- und Dokumentensammlung zur Zeitgeschichte*. 29 vols. Berlin: Dokumenten-Verlag, 1959–1979, vol. 2, p. 137–41.

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