

Wilhelm II's "Easter Message" (April 7, 1917)

Abstract

Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's (1856–1921) "new orientation" challenged the entrenched interests of conservatives. With popular protest on the rise in the spring of 1917, he persuaded the Kaiser to issue a statement, the so-called "Easter Message," which was delivered in the Prussian parliament and then published on the same day the USPD was founded. Wilhelm's statement appeared to promise constitutional reform at the war's end, but it was formulated so ambiguously that it carried little credibility. Bethmann Hollweg's own credibility was not above suspicion, for at the time of the "Easter Message" he endorsed the Supreme Command's demands for German annexations in France, Poland, and the Baltic states.

Source

Never before has the German people proved so unshakable as in this war. The realization that the Fatherland faced a grave emergency exerted a wonderfully conciliatory force, and despite all the sacrifices of blood that we made on foreign fields, and despite all the difficult privations that we bore at home, the will has remained unshakable to risk the utmost for the last, victorious struggle. The national and social spirits were unified in mutual understanding and gave us lasting strength. Everyone felt: what had been built up during long years of peace, amid many internal difficulties, was worth defending.

The achievements of the whole nation in war and need shine before my soul. The experiences of this struggle for our national existence are inaugurating a new epoch in magnificent solemnity. As the responsible Chancellor of the German Reich and First Minister of my Prussian Government, you face the obligation to help fulfill the demands of this time with the proper means and at the proper time. On various occasions you have spoken of the spirit in which the forms of our state's life are to be rebuilt in order to foster the free, enthusiastic cooperation of all members of our nation. The principles that you worked out on these occasions have, as you know, my approval. I am aware that in giving it, I am following the course of my grandfather, the founder of the Reich, who fulfilled his monarchical responsibilities in exemplary fashion, both when, as king of Prussia, he presided over the organization of the military, and when, as German Kaiser, he oversaw social reform. In so doing, he created the foundations on which the German people will survive this bloody time in unanimous and wrathful perseverance.

To preserve the armed forces as a true army of the people, to promote the social improvement of all classes of the people, has been my aim from the beginning of my reign. Determined as I am to serve the commonwealth, in hard-tested unity between the people and the monarchy, I have decided to begin the reconstruction of our domestic political, economic, and social life to the extent that the conditions of war permit.

Millions of our fellow countrymen are still on the battlefield. Behind the front, the settlement of differences of opinion, which are unavoidable in connection with a far-reaching alteration of the Constitution, must be postponed in the highest patriotic interest, until our warriors have returned home and can themselves by word and deed aid in the progress of the new age. However, in order to allow the necessary and practical steps in this connection to take place immediately upon the successful end of the war, which I confidently hope is not far off, I wish that the preparations be concluded without delay.

I am especially anxious to see the reorganization of the Prussian parliament and the liberation of all our

domestic politics from this problem. On my orders, preparations for altering the suffrage for the House of Delegates were made at the beginning of the war. I now charge you to submit to me concrete proposals from the State Ministry, so this work, which is basic to the structure of domestic politics in Prussia, will quickly be carried out by legislation, once our warriors have returned. Given the colossal achievements of the whole people in this terrible war, I am convinced that there is no room any longer for the three-class franchise system in Prussia. Furthermore, the proposed bill is to provide for the direct and secret election of deputies.

No King of Prussia will fail to appreciate the merits and enduring significance of the House of Lords for the state. But the House of Lords will better be able to meet the colossal demands of the coming age if, to a broader and more equitable extent than before, it unifies in its midst leading men from the diverse sectors and vocations of the people, men who are distinguished by the respect of their fellow citizens.

In renewing important dimensions of our firmly established and hard-tested state apparatus, I am acting in the traditions of my great forebears as I demonstrate my confidence in a loyal, brave, disciplined, and highly developed people.

I charge you to publish this decree at once.

Supreme Headquarters, April 7, 1917

Wilhelm I. R.

von Bethmann Hollweg

Source: "Erlaß Kaiser Wilhelms II. an den Reichskanzler v. Bethmann Hollweg vom 7. April 1917", in F. Purlitz, ed., *Der europäische Krieg in aktenmäßiger Darstellung: Deutscher Geschichtskalender*, vol. 6, Leipzig, 1919, pp. 768ff; reprinted in Ernst Rudolf Huber, *Dokumente zur deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*. 2 volumes. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1961, vol. 2, pp. 467–68.

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