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Der Furchtbarste Krieg: The search for a negotiated peace by the German Empire in the First World War

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Der furchtbarste Krieg

The search for a negotiated peace by the German Empire in the First World War



Figure 1. Reichskanzler Bethmann-Hollweg announcing the peace proposal to the Entente in the Reichstag, 12 December 1916. Retrieved from: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/der-erste-weltkrieg/frankfurter-zeitung-13-12-1916-friedensangebot-der-mittelmaechte-14465095.html>.

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Table of contents

Introduction	1
1. The illusion of a short war.....	9
1.1. The slow collapse of the Concert of Europe.....	9
1.2 The Schlieffen-plan and the necessity of a short war.....	11
1.3 Failure of the offensives and the growing call for a diplomatic solution	13
1.4 War aims and the Septemberprogramm	17
2. Escalation	20
2.1. Expansion and escalation of the war	20
2.2. The push for a separate peace in the West	22
2.3. The push for a separate peace in the East.....	24
3. The push for a general peace	28
3.1. The peace note of 1916.....	29
3.2. Peace through the Papacy	33
4. Breakdown.....	34
4.1. A shift in power	35
4.2. Unrestricted submarine warfare	38
4.3. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk	41
4.4. The Treaty of Versailles	43
Conclusion.....	44
Bibliography	48

Introduction

With the outbreak of the First World War the world experienced a catastrophe of a hitherto unknown scale. Besides the millions of lives that were lost in the war, the conflict completely uprooted the entire political and economic systems that were in place. The influences of this dislocation would continue to have a huge impact on Europe and in extension the world for decades after the fighting concluded.¹ This dislocation would be so intense that post-war Europe was unable to create a lasting peace like they had after the Napoleonic war. This, despite all the efforts and public support for post-war initiatives like the League of Nations.

The reason that the First World War had such an enormous impact was partly because of the changing nature of warfare. Warfare had seen an immense increase in lethality, which had been primarily caused by the emergence of weaponry like advanced machineguns and artillery. This resulted in the frequent use of defensive structures like trenches, which subsequently heavily favoured the defensive side in a battle. At the same time, the militaries still put a great deal of trust in decisive battles, this created the conditions for the massive amounts of casualties during the war. It was therefore also much more difficult to succeed with an offensive and end the war within a short timeframe.² This type of warfare, which could be classified as a form of total war, affected, and called on the entire population and would therefore be heavily dependent on the population to continue fighting.³ This meant that much attention had to be given to motivating the populace to support the war and convincing them that alternatives, like peace initiatives, were seriously considered. This was especially the case in Germany where the defensive character of the war was stressed throughout the war by large parts of the population and the government.⁴

Both the German People and the military and political leaders had hoped and largely expected a rather fast-paced invasion and subsequent victory in France like the Franco-Prussian war. This military victory was to be followed by a favourable peace that would give Germany a seat at the table among the world-powers. Like the other powers in Europe, Germany had created a military plan for the possibility of the outbreak of a war in Europe.

¹ Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (München 2014) 3.

² Wilson C. Blythe Jr, 'A History of Operational Art', *Military Review* (November & December 2018), 39.

³ Without the broad support of the German people, it would not be plausible that the German industry and armed forces could continue fighting a total war like the one that the First World War descended to.

⁴ See for example the official peace note of the Central powers to the Entente of the 30th of December in: Robert Piloty. *Das Friedensangebot der Mittelmächte* (Tübingen 1917) (Via Münchener digitalisierungszentrum) <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb11125398?page=,1> (Consulted from 20-05-2022 to 20-09-2022), 2.

This German plan, devised by Alfred von Schlieffen and modified by Helmuth von Moltke (the younger), planned for a decisive battle as soon as possible which would knock France out of the war in a few weeks, which would then free up the troops to finish the war by defeating Russia and isolating Great Britain.

The failure to achieve a decisive victory at the Marne made this possibility of ending the war in the West with a decisive battle, a so-called super-Cannae, almost impossible.⁵ The Schlieffen-plan had not been designed for a *Vernichtungskrieg*, therefore the failure of the German army to win the battle of the Marne and the changing face of warfare made the Schlieffen-plan completely obsolete.⁶ The battle of the Marne became the turning point where the war of movement, that had almost reached Paris, turned into a stalemate, and caused the advent of trench warfare.⁷ Although the battle of the Marne was mostly framed in German media as a tactical retreat, instead of a true defeat, the hope for a fast victory in the West disappeared. This can for example be seen by articles that directly try to explain why the offensive is taking longer and try to discredit the rumours that it was not possible anymore to have a decisive victory on the Western front.⁸ Besides the strategic disadvantage that the failure to win the first battle of the Marne caused, it also resulted in a corresponding blow to morale.⁹ Afterwards, the newspapers mostly shifted their focus to the successful defence in the East in the months of August and September with the successful battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian lakes, but it became increasingly clear that this would not be a glorious and fast-paced war that some had anticipated, but rather the new industrialised form of warfare which would take a heavy toll on the entire population.¹⁰

With the disappearing of the path to rapid victory and the increasing loss of lives elements in both the German government and the German population became increasingly interested in the conclusion of the conflict or with some of the belligerents through a negotiated peace.¹¹ This, in combination with the strong motivation of the German

⁵ Named after the battle of Cannae between the Romans and Carthaginians in 216 B.C.

⁶ With the onset of the totalising of the conflict in German society through food shortages, mass casualties and conscription for the war effort the war was classified as a *Vernichtungskrieg* in the German media. The concept is comparable to the total war concept; Gerhard p. Groß 'There was a Schlieffen plan: new sources on the history of German military planning', *War in History* 14 issue 4(2008) 389-431, there 390.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ 'Planmäßiges vorgehen' *Vossische Zeitung* (5 oktober 1914).

⁹ Holger Afflerbach, *Die militärische Planung im Deutschen Reich in Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse.* (Weyarn 1997) 286.

¹⁰ This type of warfare had been anticipated by some authors and military experts before the war broke out. An example of this is the book: *Das Menschenschlachthaus* by Wilhelm Lamzus.

¹¹ 'Unser Wille zum Frieden' *Vossische Zeitung* (13th of December 1916) Morning Edition; There are however clear differences between the more conservative groups that were driven by the failure of the decisive military victory and advocated for negotiated peace with separate countries in order to ultimately be able to better their

government to uphold the image that Germany was fighting a defensive war and was open to reasonable peace terms, made Germany one of the main actors of the warring nations that tried to initiate peace negotiations.¹² The first discussions of Germany with other belligerents already began to take place in the final months of 1914, these discussions were mainly aimed at securing a separate peace with either Russia, France, or Belgium. The demands that were put forward in these discussions were not extensive and were designed to be attractive to both these powers. The Russians were, for example, offered peace if they agreed to much closer trade links with Germany and some token territorial concessions.¹³ The successful conclusion of a separate peace would have improved the military-strategic situation of the Germans considerably as they would no longer be forced to wage a high intensity war on two fronts. Therefore, there was a lot of motivation to conclude peace with one of these Entente powers, not only by the populace and politicians, but by the military leadership as well.¹⁴

The offers of a separate peace were refused by both Russia and France throughout the final months of 1914 and the entirety of 1915. The main reason that these offers were not seriously considered by either the Russians or the French was that these countries still had sufficient confidence that they would eventually win the war and get much better terms if they continued fighting.¹⁵ Although the Germans were able to threaten the French capital and important Russian cities, this proved to not be enough to seriously compromise the ability or will to keep on fighting in either country.¹⁶ Besides this believe that they had a high chance of winning this war, the French also saw a stronger Germany or even a return to the status quo as an existential threat.¹⁷ This is why they would not accept any peace terms that would not significantly weaken the German Empire.

This view of the war in existential terms was also present in German society. And where the French and English saw the Germans and their growing power and economic prowess as the main obstacle to peace, the Germans primarily saw the English and their

strategic position in the war and the more moderate forces centred around the SPD that were already pressuring the government to abstain from annexation and end the conflict as soon as the Entente was open to reasonable terms.

¹² This image of Germany fighting a defensive war was especially important to keep the *Burgfrieden* intact. See Frits Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland 1800-heden* (Amsterdam 2005) 232-233.

¹³ Lancelot Farrar, *Divide and Conquer. German Efforts to conclude a separate peace, 1914-1918*, (Boulder 1978) 18 & 189.

¹⁴ The military leadership was overall much less enthusiastic about peace initiatives, especially if the Germans did not come out of the war stronger than they had been before.

¹⁵ David Stevenson, The failure of peace by negotiation in 1917. *The Historical Journal*, (1991) 34, 65-66.

¹⁶ The threat to Russian cities only appeared much later as there was initially fighting on German soil in East-Prussia at the beginning of the war.

¹⁷ David Stevenson, French War Aims and the American Challenge, 1914-1918, In *the Historical Journal* 22(issue 4), (1979) 877-894, there 884.

complete domination of the sea in both military and financial terms as a threat to the existence of an independent Germany that could participate on the world stage like the other powers.¹⁸ This was, according to the Germans, further shown by the hypocrisy of the English in the treatment of vessels of neutral states. These were, even though they were carrying non-military cargo, stopped frequently. This was one of the main reasons that the Central powers would get increasingly serious food shortages the longer that the war raged on. Therefore, several newspapers articles and politicians professed that it would be imperative to restructure the world from unipolarity into a more multipolar world where there would be multiple world powers that would balance each other out. In this new order, Germany would get a seat at the table. This desire had already been worded in a lucid manner by the former *Reichskanzler* Bernhard von Bülow in his speech in the *Reichstag* on the sixth of December 1897: ‘Wir wollen niemand in den Schatten stellen, aber wir verlangen auch unseren Platz an der Sonne.’¹⁹

These visions of the war in existential terms and the high demands by both sides made negotiations extremely challenging because the demands of the opposing powers were deemed unacceptable by both the politicians and populations.

In the final months of 1916, the military situation was improving for the Central Powers, with the capture of Bucharest and successes on other Eastern fronts the negotiation position of Germany increased greatly. This was a position of strength that German moderates like von Bethmann-Hollweg and Kaiser Wilhelm II wanted to use to finally end the conflict without making great concessions to the Entente.²⁰ This, despite strong opposition from, among others, the Third OHL under the leadership of Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg who advocated for the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare which would result, according to them, in a *Siegfrieden*.²¹

The peace note that was consequently send did not contain any specific demands but was rather a proposal to start diplomatic negotiations and peace talks.²² It therefore differed significantly from the previous failed attempts in opening the negotiations, which had all started with rigid demands on both sides.²³ These peace notes were widely published in

¹⁸ ‘Deutschlands Weltinteressen’ *Frankfurter Zeitung* (1 January 1916) Morning Edition.

¹⁹ Speech of Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow on the 6th of December 1897, Retrieved from: https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt_k9_bsb00002771_00112.html (Consulted on 13-08-2022).

²⁰ Despite the warlike language of the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, he did not desire a preventative war or radical war aims, the Kaiser mostly supported the moderate positions of figures like Bethmann-Hollweg. See for example: Christopher Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II: A life in power*. (London 2009).

²¹ Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland 1800-heden*, 231.

²² Piloty, *Das Friedensangebot der Mittelmächte*, 2.

²³ *Ibidem*.

German newspapers and were thus also important for the German government to show the increasingly war weary population that the German government did everything to end the war and conclude a peace with the entente powers. In the wording of the proposal, it is additionally very clear that the government did not frame the war as a glorious endeavour, but rather as a terrible conflict by using terms such as the *'furchtbarste krieg'* and the war as a European *'Katastrophe'*.²⁴ Although some newspapers warned against being overly optimistic, the overall position was that it was a good step towards finally ceasing hostilities.²⁵

Although the German diplomatic overture had not set any demands, the Entente powers quickly declined these offers to negotiate. In the diplomatic answers of the Entente powers, they pushed hard on the narrative that the peace proposals were mere tricks to gain the upper hand geopolitically and that the conclusion of peace would turn out unacceptable for the Entente powers.²⁶ The official response of the Entente stated for example: 'In reality, the overture made by the Central Powers is but an attempt calculated to work upon the evolution of war and of finally imposing a German peace'.²⁷ Besides this, the Entente proclaimed that German society was different and that it had inherent flaws like Prussian militarism which prevented them from seriously negotiating a peace with the German Empire.²⁸ These views in combination with the feeling by both sides that they would eventually be able to militarily overcome the opponent created a situation where major peace initiatives like the 1916 peace note, but also the later negotiations through the papacy eventually failed.

Only in situations where countries were at the brink of collapse would one of the sides give in to peace terms. This would first happen to Russia with the treaty of Brest-Litovsk and later to Germany with the treaty of Versailles. Both treaties were more akin to dictates to defeated powers instead of a negotiated peace with concessions on both sides, as in both cases one side did not have a bargaining position. These dictates would ultimately contribute to the very unstable post-war situation.

These initiatives have for a long time been seen through the lens of the so-called 'Fischer-these', which states that both the civilian government and the military agreed to steer

²⁴ Piloty, *Das Friedensangebot der Mittelmächte*, 2.

²⁵ 'Friedensangebot!' *Münchener Stadtanzeiger* (16 December 1916).

²⁶ This framing can be clearly seen in the responses of the Entente powers to the peace note of 1916 see for example: Piloty, *Das Friedensangebot der Mittelmächte*, 9.

²⁷ Entente Reply to German Proposals (12 December 1916) found in: James Brown, Scott: *Official statements of war aims and peace proposals, December 1916 to November 1918*. No. 31. (Washington 1921) 27.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

towards starting a war from 1911-1912 onwards and to use this war to make Germany into a world power, and that characters like von Bethmann-Hollweg mostly agreed to the drastic changes as they were proposed by figures on the annexationist right like Erich Ludendorff.²⁹ He also emphasized that there was, according to him, a great amount of continuity between the war aims before the war and those during the war.³⁰ This was most clearly illustrated according to Fischer by the so-called *September-programm* wherein extensive war aims in France, Belgium and Russia were professed in combination with the idea of *Mitteleuropa*.³¹ This idea consisted of the idea to create a customs union within continental Europe that would facilitate German economic dominance.

In extension of this debate surrounding war aims Fischer saw German wartime policies almost exclusively in the terms of war aims, instead of the strategy and diplomacy that were forced upon the German government through the exigencies of war.³² Logically following from this point of view came the vision that the peace initiatives that were undertaken had no chance of succeeding and were thus doomed from the start. Although there were contemporaries of Fischer like Gerhard Ritter and Andreas Hillgruber who disagreed with parts of this view, most of the views of Fischer were eventually broadly shared by most researchers in the field like John C.G. Röhl and Immanuel Geiss. The Fischer-these was therefore quite influential in shaping the image of an aggressive Germany that had no interest in successfully concluding a negotiated peace.³³ In 1971, the economic historian Zbyněk Zeman, in his work *A Diplomatic History of the First World War*, focused more specifically on the Peace initiatives and criticised the view that these initiatives were not genuine or that they were set up to fail.³⁴ More recently, the more general view on the war aims and German aggression have also been challenged by historians like Christopher Clarke, who adheres to the more balanced view that there was also support for proposals like a return to a status quo ante bellum or the conclusion of war with only minor war reparations.³⁵

²⁹ Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914-1918* (Düsseldorf 1961).

³⁰ Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Die Urkatastrophe Deutschlands. Der Erste Weltkrieg 1914-1918* (Stuttgart 2002) 15.

³¹ Von Bethmann-Hollweg Denkschrift [Memorandum by Bethmann Hollweg], (September 9, 1914), Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde, Reichskanzlei, Grosses Hauptquartier 21, No. 2476, Reprinted in Wolfdieter Bihl, *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*. (Darmstadt 1991), 61-62.

³² Zbyněk Zeman, *A Diplomatic History of The First World War*, (London 1971) (Introduction), X.

³³ For a discussion on the Fischer these see for example: Annika Mombauer, *The Fischer Controversy 50 Years on*, *The Journal of Contemporary History*, 48(2), (2013), 231-240.

³⁴ Zeman, *A Diplomatic History of The First World War*.

³⁵ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to war in 1914* (London 2013); Christopher Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II: A life in Power* (London 2009).

Although the wider debate about war aims has been extensively researched and discussed, the connected subject of the peace initiatives has not received the same attention. One of the scarce recent studies that specifically dives deep into the peace initiatives and why they failed is the 2015 paper by Lanoszka and Hunzeker.³⁶ Apart from this, these initiatives are mostly mentioned shortly or treated as unimportant events. Even though the research into these peace initiatives and the reception of them in newspapers could result in important new information on the reasoning of the German military and government and the views of the German public.³⁷ Additionally, it could reveal why decision makers failed to stop the conflict despite the fact that it became increasingly apparent to both sides that prolonged warfare could severely threaten the survival of their own nation states.

This thesis will focus on the German attempts to conclude the First World War through a negotiated peace. Although post-war opinions did not pay much attention to these proposals, even more so after World War two, Germany played an important role in starting peace talks and trying to negotiate peace. For this central argument that the role of Germany in peace negotiations was much greater than has been admitted, and that these proposals were not mere ruses, it is vital to take a close look at not only the main German decision makers like Ludendorff, Kaiser Wilhelm and von Bethmann-Hollweg but also at the wider population as the call and dependence on the population was much greater in this new totalised form of warfare than it had been previously.³⁸ This thesis will be structured around the primary research question: To what extent were the German peace proposals genuine, and why did all these peace proposals fail to materialise while the toll of the war was increasing every day that the fighting dragged on? The secondary research question supplements this by focusing more on the portrayal of the peace initiatives to the public: How were the various peace initiatives portrayed in the German press?

I will research these German peace initiatives by analysing the plethora of available diplomatic and governmental primary sources from both the Central Powers and the Entente as well as newspapers from across Germany. To prevent getting a biased or one-sided view the selection of sources will be based on a diversity of political leanings and geographic

³⁶ Alexander Lanoszka and Michael Hunzeker. "Rage of honor: Entente indignation and the lost chance for peace in the First World War." *Security Studies* 24,4 (2015): 662-695.

³⁷ The reasoning for the importance of the support of the public is based upon the dependence of the belligerents on the public to keep the war going, it was thus imperative to not go against a majority as this could threaten the entire war effort and in extent of this the bargaining position.

³⁸ Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (London 2014) 4.

locations. These primary sources will be supplemented with multiple secondary sources which will offer broad information on events and data that are essential to this research.

The first chapter will go into the planning and the illusions of a short war and what happened when the realisation of a protracted and destructive war emerged in the German population. In the second chapter the escalation of the conflict and the increasing pressure to succeed in negotiating peace settlements is investigated. The focus in this chapter is mainly on the military situation and the increasing number of casualties as strong push-factors for ending the war through a diplomacy. The third chapter will be centred around the main peace proposals that were put forward in the years 1916 and 1917, and how these new initiatives were a stark contrast to earlier proposals. The fourth and final chapter will look at the eventual failure of the peace proposals and the collapse of the German will and capacity to fight on which forced Germany to accept the Versailles treaty.

1. The illusion of a short war

‘Ihr werdet wieder zu Hause sein, ehe noch das Laub von den Bäumen fällt’³⁹

The outbreak of war in August 1914 had been the first time in more than forty years that there had been a large-scale conflict between the main European powers. It was therefore widely assumed, apart from a couple of dissenting voices, that war would once again be relatively brief, successful and without catastrophic loss of life. All these ideals for a short war culminated in the Schlieffen-plan, which planned to separately knock out the two main belligerents of the Entente powers within a couple of weeks using decisive battles. When the war degraded into a prolonged, bloody, and costly catastrophe, there was no true alternative to the Schlieffen-plan and the public and the political and military leaders kept hoping for a breakthrough. With the failure of the Schlieffen-plan, diplomatic negotiations were increasingly seen as a credible method to end the war in a way that would not negatively impact the German state. To realize this goal the German state tried convincing either Russia or France to conclude peace. This would save the Germans from the feared prolonged two-front war which already proved to be just as costly as some people had feared. Although these early steps to peace were mainly made with the specific goal of breaking up the Russo-French alliance and thereby opening the road towards a German victory, they were also the first signs that there was increasing motivation to conclude the war with a negotiated peace because of the failures to achieve a decisive victory.⁴⁰

1.1. The slow collapse of the Concert of Europe

Otto von Bismarck had after the Franco-Prussian war created a stable system of shifting alliances, which sought to on the one hand preserve the new German state and on the other to prevent a war between great powers. One of the most important factors of this continuation of the Concert of Europe was the statement of Germany that it was a satiated state and that it would not cause further turmoil to the continental order. Besides this statement, diplomacy was imperative to keep this system of shifting alliances in place. To facilitate this, Bismarck sought treaties with all European powers without committing entirely to one. And although he was certainly aware of the threat that a revanchist France could present, especially after they began to re-arm, Bismarck did not support a pre-emptive war saying:

³⁹ Speech by Wilhelm II to the troops marching off to war in Holger Afflenbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich 1994) 171.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A life*. (Oxford 2011) 472.

‘Pre-emptive war is like committing suicide in the fear of death’⁴¹

This view was heavily tested when the newspaper *Die Post* published an article named ‘Krieg in Sicht’ in 1875, in which the author stated that the French forces were re-arming at an alarming rate and becoming a threat to the German empire.⁴² Following this article there was increasing pressure on the government to think about a preventive war. The subsequent warnings from the other European states that they would not accept such a war confirmed longer held ideas about the unfavorability of a new European conflagration for the German empire. Furthermore, the Franco-Prussian war was primarily won, in contrast to the framing of the war as a purely military success, by the diplomatic isolation of France.⁴³ The strong reactions of the other powers thus showed that another conflict between Germany and France would not be accepted by the major powers, which made the chances of being able to gain anything by a war with France small. Subsequently, the calls for a preventative war were quickly tempered by the German government. This crisis further emphasized the importance of peace in Europe for the stability of the German empire.

Although Bismarck was keenly aware of the danger- and remarkably successful in preventing a war between the great powers, he failed to reform the foreign affairs office in such a way that his policies would be continued after he departed. The ways in which Bismarck prevented a so-called nightmare of the coalitions did not carry over in the new foreign office under his successor Leo von Caprivi. The Reichskanzler von Caprivi with the support of the German emperor Wilhelm II ended the reinsurance treaty with Russia in favour of a close relationship with Austria-Hungary which upset the fragile balance that Bismarck had created. This resulted in Russia seeking closer relations with France, and successively cooperating militarily and economically with the French. This eventually put Germany in the difficult position of being flanked in both the West and East by enemies and, in the case of war, forced to fight a two-front war. Apart from this, the power balance in Europe both economically and militarily had completely shifted. Not only was Germany completely dependent on Great Britain for access to the sea, but they were also increasingly vulnerable in continental Europe with the manpower and economic power advantage of the Entente.

⁴¹ James Retallack, *Imperial Germany, 1871–1918*. (Oxford 2008) 29.

⁴² ‘Ist Krieg in Sicht?’ *Die Post* (April 9th, 1875).

⁴³ Lancelot Farrar, The short war illusion, the syndrome of German Strategy in August-december 1914, In *Militargeschichtliche Zeitgeschrift*, volume 12/4, (1976) 39-52, 44.

1.2 The Schlieffen-plan and the necessity of a short war

Because of the dissolution of the system of shifting alliances and the resulting power imbalances the German military began planning for the eventuality of a full-scale war between the two blocks that were being formed in Europe. This plan was first presented by Alfred Graf von Schlieffen with the memorandum '*Krieg gegen Frankreich*', this memorandum posited some ideas which would increase the chances of the German army in the case of either French aggression or a situation in which they themselves were the aggressor and would need to defeat the French army through an offensive.⁴⁴ One central tenant of this plan was to not focus on a long and bloody offensive towards the heavily fortified French-German border, but rather to go around these defences and push for a rapid and decisive offensive into France through Belgian and Dutch territory.

This concept would, be it in an increasingly modified form, go on to shape the plans of the successor of von Schlieffen Helmuth von Moltke. Moltke agreed with Schlieffen that in the case of a war with France that the flanking manoeuvre through Belgium and the Netherlands would be vital to a German victory.⁴⁵ This plan would receive increasing attention as the strategic situation of Germany continued to decline mostly due to the closer ties of France with Russia. With the close ties of France to Russia, Germany would not only be numerically at a disadvantage but economically as well. Therefore, a fast and decisive offensive was seen as the only way that Germany could win this war.⁴⁶ If the German army managed to rapidly knock out France, it could then focus on the Eastern front. Following this, the German army could utilise the excellent railway network and force concentration to swiftly move to the Eastern front and subsequently defeat the Russian armies in the East.

In the original memorandum there was stated that the offensive should be rapid, but a clear timeline was never given. The successor to von Schlieffen, Moltke the younger, did specify the time frame in his adaptation of the Schlieffen-memorandum. Moltke anticipated France to fall in four- to five weeks.⁴⁷ Aforementioned is one of the indications that the military elite had a very short war in mind when they were planning for the possibility of a

⁴⁴ This memorandum is now more commonly known as the Schlieffen-plan. Alfred Graf von Schlieffen '*Krieg gegen Frankreich*' dated December 1905, but commonly known to be backdated from 1906. Retrieved from: https://www.1000dokumente.de/index.html?c=dokument_de&dokument=0097_spl&object=translation&st=&l=de / Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (BSB, München, 1000dokumente.de) (Consulted 01-06-2022).

⁴⁵ Robert Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870–1916* (Cambridge 2005) 70-72. Von Moltke did make some significant changes later, one of which was the plan to leave the territorial integrity of The Netherlands intact.

⁴⁶ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 104.

⁴⁷ Gerhard Ritter, *Der Schlieffen plan* (Munich 1957) 541.

war with other European powers. This stands in stark contrast to many of the speeches and works wherein the military elite talked about the possibility of a prolonged war and the impact of the rapid industrialisation and advances in weapons technology. Von Moltke (The Elder) had stated in a Reichstag speech in 1890 that:

‘Die Zeit der Kabinettskriege liegt hinter uns- wir haben jetzt nur noch den Volkskrieg’⁴⁸

This referred to the ending of the long period of wars in Europe which were mainly isolated and limited to politics. A perfect example of a *Kabinettskrieg* was the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, whereby the war did not form a threat to the existence of either country and was planned and comparably ordered.⁴⁹ The absence of both the existential threat to either country and the containment of war to the armies instead of the general populace ultimately led to the conclusion of the war with a stable peace treaty. This war stands in stark contrast to the chaotic thirty years war or the American civil war which were classified as *Volkskrieg*. Wars that were classified as *Volkskrieg* were not primarily political, but rather ideological, which made these wars especially chaotic, lengthy, and bloody when compared to more limited forms of warfare.⁵⁰

These ideas mostly failed to have a significant influence on military planning. The main reason for this is that it was not so much that they were sure of a short war, but rather that it was the only outcome wherein Germany would have good chances of winning. This can be seen by a general doubt in the military elite whether Germany could win a prolonged conflict with the Entente. If a victory could be achieved against the Entente with their numerical and economical superiority, it would have to be a rapid and decisive victory.⁵¹ Von Schlieffen, who was aware of the ways in which war had changed and what kind of impact this kind of prolonged war would have on Germany, was motivated by this scenario to lay the groundwork of a rapid offensive into France.

Germany was not the only state that put all their hopes on such a rapid offensive and the prospect of a victory that would be determined by the first few battles, this kind of optimism was all-present in the Entente, the Central- and even the neutral powers.⁵² Because of this, the strategic military and diplomatic planning of all these nations were mainly focused

⁴⁸ Von Moltke (The Elder) in the Reichstag, May 14th 1890, in Stig Förster, *vor dem Sprung ins Dunkle: Die militärische Debatte über den Krieg der Zukunft 1880–1914* (Paderborn 2016) 10.

⁴⁹ Jörn Leonhard. *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (München 2014) 22.

⁵⁰ Stig Förster, *Im Reich des Absurden* in Bernd Wegner, *Wie Kriege Entstehen: Zum Hintergrund von Staatenkonflikten* (Schöningh 2000) 248 & 249.

⁵¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 104.

⁵² Farrar, *The short war illusion*, 43.

on this scenario, which ignored the numerous warnings and predictions of a long and bloody war that would prove to be much closer to the eventual result.

1.3 Failure of the offensives and the growing call for a diplomatic solution

With the outbreak of war, the Schlieffen-plan was quickly put into effect. On August 4 the German army marched into Belgium, following the refusal of the Belgians to let the German army through. Although there had been negotiations and a naïve hope that the Belgians would not interfere, this reaction had already been predicted in the memorandum of von Schlieffen.⁵³ With the breaching of the territorial integrity of Belgium the British were almost certain to intervene, leading to a further escalation. Moltke had even stated during the mobilisation that the war would evolve in the likely event that England would intervene.⁵⁴ The implications of these moves were well known by statesmen like von Bethmann-Hollweg, but similarly to the military elite, von Bethmann-Hollweg thought that this could be managed as long as the military objectives were realised.⁵⁵

The first few weeks of the war seemed to go largely according to plan.⁵⁶ Even though the German army had some difficulties in taking Belgian fortifications and cities, they seemed to be victoriously advancing at a high pace and thereby forcing the Entente forces to retreat which was one of the most important initial goals. But the so-called *Schicksalschlag* that was planned did not happen. The French army either retreated or stayed in their defensive positions.⁵⁷ This resulted in a failure of the German army to set up a Cannae in the West and destroy the French capabilities to continue to offer resistance. Therefore, one of the essential elements of the German strategy going in the war, namely the destruction of the French army had failed. This doctrine was eloquently worded by Moltke with the words:

‘Victory means the destruction of the opponent’s strength to resist’⁵⁸

Without the destruction of the French capabilities, it would become nearly impossible to not get bogged down in a prolonged conflict as the German high command did not possess sufficient soldiers to keep up the constant pressure in France while also defending the East.⁵⁹

Despite the fast advance and the fact that a German army was only forty kilometres from Paris, the chance of knocking France out the conflict before the Russian army would be

⁵³ Alfred Graf von Schlieffen ‘*Krieg gegen Frankreich*’ Dezember 1905.

⁵⁴ Förster, *vor dem Sprung ins Dunkle*, 9.

⁵⁵ Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, 95.

⁵⁶ Farrar, *The illusion of a short war, the syndrome of German Strategy in August-December 1914*, 40.

⁵⁷ Hew Strachan, *The First World War: To Arms. Vol. I* (Oxford 2003) 242-262.

⁵⁸ Quote from von Moltke in Karl Helfferich, *Der Weltkrieg vol. 2: Vom Kriegsausbruch bis zum uneingeschränkten U-Bootkrieg* (Berlin 1919) 18.

⁵⁹ Only after the Second Battle of the Masurian Lakes (February 1915) did the defence of Prussia shift into an offensive operation as the Russian army still occupied parts of the province before the battle.

able to seriously threaten Eastern-Prussia was rather small. This would be the first sign that this seemingly great progress was not actually what it seemed, despite all the positive headlines in the newspapers.⁶⁰

The final confirmation that the ideal of a short war would no longer be plausible was the battle of the Marne, which became a turning point in the war. Before the battle itself, the failure of destroying the core of the French army, exhaustion from the rapid advance and supply problems already significantly complicated further advance.⁶¹ This, in combination with diverting two army corps to Eastern-Prussia made the German army vulnerable. With an already vulnerable army the German generals kept advancing, with the idea in mind that they could either entice or force the French into another battle of Sedan. The French sensing weakness in the German lines pursued a counter offensive on the right flank of the 1st army under general Alexander von Kluck, which rapidly created a situation where both armies in France were in great danger of becoming overrun. Because of this danger von Moltke and his generals ordered a retreat to restore a strong front. This retreat was successful, but ultimately compromised the ability to push deeper into French territory. Although the battle of the Marne had not seriously harmed the German positions or capabilities, as the Entente failed to make full use of the retreat, it did represent an immense strategic failure.

After this strategic failure both armies retreated behind the Marne, which created the first major setback in the German offensive. Although the retreat had succeeded in preserving the armies and restoring the front, it was a catastrophic blow to the plan to take Paris and force the French armed forces to confront them in a decisive battle. Therefore, the chances of winning the war by military means decreased significantly and the mobile war of the first phases of the war shifted into a static and costly form of warfare on the Western front. The realisation of this opened the doors to the increasingly attractive prospect of reaching a diplomatic accord with either Russia or France.⁶²

With the disappearance of the short path to a military victory, a simultaneous change in the reporting of the conflict took place. And while this change was gradual, it did manage to shift the focus of the war in the newspapers more towards ways of ending the war.⁶³ The

⁶⁰ See for Example the article in the *Norddeutsche*, where the journalist states that the Parisians will soon hear the German artillery in the distance and experience a grand battle: ‘Der Krieg: Die Neue Große Schlacht’ *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (12 September 1914).

⁶¹ Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, 156.

⁶² This can be seen most clearly by the support of military figures for some of the separate peace initiatives with Russia; see for example: Lancelot Farrar. Carrot and stick: German efforts to conclude a separate peace with Russia, November 1914-december 1915. *East European Quarterly*, 10(2), (1976).

⁶³ ‘Planmäßiges vorgehen’ *Vossische Zeitung* (October the 5th 1914).

ongoing conflict came to be seen more and more in the light of a way to force the Entente into peace negotiations with Germany that would, in the eyes of the Germans, be fair to them. It was thus imperative to keep up the pressure on the Entente with offensives.⁶⁴ This was especially important as the war progressed as the German people, politicians and military elite saw the true hegemonic power of Great Britain to dominate the seas and subsequently being able to starve Germany of supplies.

This rivalry with Great Britain had existed before the conflict but with the commencement of war it intensified greatly. The French were no longer the main rival of Germany, but rather the English. The reason for this was the way that Great Britain had acted in the run-up and the outbreak of war. For the English had in 1911 themselves proposed rules surrounding the treatment of neutral vessels with the London declaration, but as soon as the war broke out, the English immediately used all their naval assets to not only strangle the supply of military goods, but also food stuffs and essential supplies from neutral powers.⁶⁵ This showed, according to several German newspapers and politicians, that Germany could never be truly independent as Great Britain could decide to starve Germany in submission at any time while threatening Germany if it would pursue naval parity.⁶⁶ The *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* for example stated that all the lofty ideals of Great Britain rapidly changed when it was not in their interest any longer:

“Das höchste Interessen des Weltfriedens’ habe sein Gesicht zu schnell geändert”⁶⁷

Besides this, there was also criticism on the media dominance of the English which could not only depend on a much wider reach and influence but also the ability to decide what news would and would not be spread. The English had gained this ability with their ownership of many of the undersea cables that spread the news around the world, which gave the English the sole ability to block German news from reaching the outside world.⁶⁸

It was therefore clear that Germany was economically, politically, and numerically completely outclassed by the Entente, and for there to be solid foundations for peace there had to be some change in how the European system worked. This was one of the great motivators to on the one hand carry on with the war until the English would come to the table and on the

⁶⁴ ,Wir Halten Durch ‘*Berliner Morgenpost* (18 September 1914).

⁶⁵ ‘England und der Londoner Deklaration‘ *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (12 November 1914, Morning Edition); ‘Wieder ein Neutralitätsbruch Englands‘ *Freiburger Zeitung* (11 September, 1914, Morning Edition)

⁶⁶ Especially the pressure and threat of force that England used on neutral nations to stop supplying Germany caused uproar in Germany.

⁶⁷ ‘England und der Londoner Deklaration‘ *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (12 November 1914, Morning Edition).

⁶⁸ ,Abrechnung des Reichskanzlers mit England.‘ *Vossische Zeitung* (14 September 1914).

other a motivation to conclude peace with either Russia or France as the likelihood of successful negotiations with the remaining powers would increase significantly once one of the Entente powers had already been pacified.

Besides this, there was also increasing attention for the new way in which war was waged and the implications that this had. Although these articles do not go into full detail of the gruesome nature of the war that was unfolding in the West, it is a sign that the German press understood that this was not the same as the 'glorious wars' during the Napoleonic campaign.⁶⁹

Starting in 1914 the first serious attempts took place to contact politicians and policymakers from both Russia and France.⁷⁰ These attempts were about trying to open a line of communication to discuss possible peace terms and the exit of one of these nations from the war. This would of course have helped greatly as the two-front war that the German empire was waging prevented any true breakthrough that would lead to a conclusion of the war. These steps failed in the formation of any true peace proposals in 1914, but they would be the starting point of a plethora of German peace proposals that followed.

⁶⁹ 'Rückwärtigen Verbindungen' *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (18 September 1914).

⁷⁰ Lancelot Farrar. Carrot and stick: German efforts to conclude a separate peace with Russia, November 1914-december 1915. *East European Quarterly*, 10(2), (1976); Fisher, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 225.

1.4 War aims and the Septemberprogramm

In the chaotic start of the conflict the war aims debate in German politics did not immediately result in any concrete demands or plans.⁷¹ The focus of both the public and the government was, initially, rather on the defensive character of the war and how Germany had been encircled and threatened by its opponents, and would now have to defend itself.⁷² This feeling was, for example, voiced by the Kaiser with his speech on August 4th, wherein he stated ‘It is no lust of conquest that inspires us’.⁷³ This image of a defensive war and the position of Germany as an unwilling participant was additionally very helpful in creating and holding on to the support of the moderates that were dominant in the left-wing parties like the SPD and the left-liberal *Fortschrittspartei*.⁷⁴ This was especially important as there had already been anti-war demonstrations organised by the SPD on the 28th of July that showed that there was a large pacifist undercurrent in these parties which could threaten the unity and war effort.⁷⁵ Although this defensive character stayed on the forefront of the newspapers and communication of the government, imperialistic elements also began to voice their preferences for annexations after the initial shock of the outbreak of war. Furthermore, by holding some influential positions in the military, government, educational and industrial elites, these calls for more extreme war goals could not be completely ignored or silenced by the more moderate elements.⁷⁶ In between these two factions the character of Bethmann-Hollweg stood as he practised a ‘*Politik der Diagonale*’ which consisted of an effort to retain the support of both factions for the war effort and the government.

Before the outbreak of the First World War there had been widespread support in both the elites and the general population for the idea of *Weltpolitik*. This idea of *Weltpolitik* consisted of making Germany into a world power which would be able to get a seat at the table with powers like Great Britain.⁷⁷ Even well-known liberals like Max Weber were strong supporters of this idea of *Weltpolitik* prior and at the start of the war.⁷⁸ Among this base of support there was however no consensus on the matter of how Germany should pursue this goal. Before the war most of the supporters of this idea of *Weltpolitik* in the political and

⁷¹ Jesko von Hoegen, *Der Held von Tannenberg. Genese und Funktion des Hindenburg-Mythos*, (Cologne 2007), 193.

⁷² Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 96.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, 95.

⁷⁴ Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866-1918 II: Machtstaat vor der Demokratie*, (Munich 1993) 804.

⁷⁵ ‘Der Kriegsprotest des Proletariats’ *Vorwärts* (29th of July).

⁷⁶ Boterman, *Moderne Geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 218.

⁷⁷ Hans-Ulrich Wehler *The German Empire 1871-1918*, (Warwickshire 1985) 193.

⁷⁸ Patrick Dassen, *Sprong in het duister: Duitsland en de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam 2019) E-book, 25.

economic elites wanted to pursue this goal mainly by pressuring the other powers by means of the increasing dominance of the German economy. This goal could realistically be achieved without starting an expansive war, which sets this group apart from the fringe annexationist groups like the *Alldeutscher Verband*, which did directly support and advocate for a preventative war. Only during the war, sizeable groups of intellectuals and industrial magnates became interested in using the war to further the goal of a German world power.⁷⁹ But the increasing radicalisation of these influential elites did empower the fringe arguments for extensive annexations and the forced economic dominance of Europe that had previously been mostly isolated to a small fringe.

Germany like the other powers did not have any concrete territorial goals before the outbreak of the war, this did however change once the war broke out.⁸⁰ The pressure from the pro-annexationist faction did produce results as their ideas and plans were heard and eventually heavily influenced the *Septemberprogramm*, which consisted of provisional notes in the case of a conclusion of peace. In this programme, objectives such as substantial territorial demands from France, the transformation of Belgium into a German vassal state, the annexation of Luxembourg, and the creation of the central European customs union under the leadership of Germany were described.⁸¹ Being written on the 9th of September at a point that a rapid defeat of France by the German army seemed plausible, it would function as the basis for the negotiations that would shortly commence after this imagined victory in France.⁸² If the plan would have been fully implemented it was supposed to be a blueprint for the German political, economic and military domination of continental Europe.

There are however some critical notes possible on the presentation of the *Septemberprogramm* as a true blueprint for German foreign policy. For example, Bethmann-Hollweg was not actually present at the council on the 8th of September when these plans were put forward.⁸³ Furthermore, the programme was never ratified as a binding document or signed by the Kaiser, who still possessed considerable influence at this time, which begs the question if Bethmann-Hollweg really planned to hold himself to this rigid and expansive plan for annexations, or that Bethmann used the *Septemberprogramm* as a way to sabotage the arguments of the extreme nationalists.⁸⁴ Another piece of evidence for this is that the actual

⁷⁹ Dassen, *Sprong in het Duister*, 11.

⁸⁰ Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and mass killing in the First World War* (Oxford 2007) 94-95.

⁸¹ Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 103.

⁸² Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 217.

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ David Stevenson: *1914–1918. Der Erste Weltkrieg*. (Düsseldorf 2006), 164.; Georges-Henri Soutou: *Die Kriegsziele des Deutschen Reiches, Frankreichs, Großbritanniens und der Vereinigten Staaten während des*

implementation of these extreme demands would have severely threatened the political stability in Germany through the endangerment of the *Burgfrieden*.⁸⁵

Ersten Weltkrieges: ein Vergleich. In: Michalka: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*. 1997, S. 28 f.; Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 219.

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

2. Escalation

After the battle of the Marne the Schlieffen plan had no true applicability anymore. The subsequent lack of an alternative quickly led to both the static types of warfare in the West and continuation of the two-front war that the military planners had tried to prevent. Whilst the realisation of this failure was present in both the political and military elite, the absence of a contingency plan led to a continuation of the offensives that were based upon the Schlieffen plan. This continued trust in the superiority of the attack and seeking the decisive battle would soon lead to massive amounts of casualties and shortages of supplies both for the military and the civilian population. These shortages gripped the nation as early as 1914 as things like bread, military supplies and fuels were already getting increasingly scarce.

These worsening conditions steadily increased the popularity of realising a peace with one of the Entente powers. Both in the East and the West this would lead to several proposals, but the focus was generally on Russia. One of the primary reasons for this was the general agreement on the fact that a separate peace with Russia would be beneficial and that it should be pursued, not only by the political leaders but the military elite as well.⁸⁶ These political and military leaders did however differ significantly in how the peace should be concluded and how this should be realised. It is possible to identify two sides of this debate on peace among the German leaders, the side under the auspice of *Feldmarshall* Paul von Hindenburg and general Erich Ludendorff, who preferred a strategy of maximal military pressure on Russia to force them to come to the table. And the other side under the German Kaiser and general Erich von Falkenhayn who advocated for a political solution in the East instead of the more militaristic option. Although both camps differed greatly in how they would pursue a separate peace, both agreed that it would be necessary.

2.1. Expansion and escalation of the war

After the failure of the Schlieffen-plan Moltke was replaced by Falkenhayn who tried to salvage the war by stopping the Anglo-French counter offensive and defeating the Entente decisively in Belgium. This race to the sea, as it would later become known, consisted of both the Germans and the Anglo-French armies trying to outflank each other in order to reach the strategically important coastal cities. While there was some German success in reaching Calais, the successive battle of Ypres and Langemarck were both unsuccessful as ways to

⁸⁶ Artur Zimmerman was the only prominent leader who did not agree on a separate peace with Russia. Lancelot Farrar. Carrot and stick: German efforts to conclude a separate peace with Russia, November 1914-december 1915. *East European Quarterly*, 10(2), (1976), 154.

realise the set objectives and had cost the lives of more than 100.000 German soldiers.⁸⁷ After the failure of the German army to win the race to the sea, a mostly static defensive line formed from the English Channel all the way up to the border of Switzerland.

In this new form of warfare, many new weapons like poison gas, weaponised airplanes and barbed wire would see their first widescale use. And their effect was devastating with an estimated death toll of one million German soldiers in the first five months.⁸⁸ This type of attrition warfare would most heavily impact the Central powers, as they were both economically and demographically outclassed by the combined Entente powers. Besides the casualties of war, labour and supply shortages would rapidly change the situation in Germany for the worse. Before the war Germany had been dependent on the importation of one third of all their food, which was almost entirely cut off after the English blockade was initiated.⁸⁹ With the failure of the military to end the conflict in a short timeframe, Germany would start to get familiar with the pressures and consequences of modern war. Unemployment, for example, skyrocketed from a low of 2.7 percent in July to a high of 22.7 in September.⁹⁰ The subsequent shortages began as early as October 1914 as the regular products like bread started to be replaced with substitutes, the so-called *Ersatz*, which replaced scarce ingredients with more commonly available but lesser quality ingredients.⁹¹

The war would not stop due to these shortages because of initiatives like the *Kriegsrohstoffabteilung* (K.R.A.), which was set up by Walther Rathenau and von Falkenhayn to secure the much-needed resources to keep the war going. But initiatives like these failed to provide adequate essential resources for the population. This, in combination with past grievances started to put pressure on the *Burgfrieden* that had, at the start of the war, ensured that Germany would form one front against the enemies. These pressures would start with socialist protests against the invasion into Belgium and would continue to become more frequent as the economic situation in Germany worsened.⁹² Because of this it became increasingly important for politicians to both ensure that the continued image of Germany fighting a defensive war remained intact, and that it was doing everything it could to end the war as fast as possible either through a military or diplomatic victory to relieve the worsening

⁸⁷ *Der Weltkrieg von 1914 bis 1918*. Band 5, 401 & Band 6, 25, (Berlin 1929) (Governmental document without a stated author). Retrieved from: (<https://digi.landesbibliothek.at/viewer/image/AC01859873/2/>) (Consulted on 7-6-2022).

⁸⁸ Frits Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland 1800-heden* (Amsterdam, 2005) 236.

⁸⁹ Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 237.

⁹⁰ Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora*, 191.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 192.

⁹² Boterman, *Modern geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 234.

situation on the Homefront. As the chances of winning the war in a short timeframe through military means were becoming increasingly smaller, the importance of peace proposals increased.

The entry of several other nations in 1914 and 1915 would cause further escalation as the entry of nations like Japan, Turkey and Italy would not only widen and intensify the conflict and its consequences for German society, but also confirm the thought that many people already had. It became clear to the wider population what had already been sufficiently clear to the military- and political leaders, namely that the war had entered a new phase. And that this war, if one focused on a purely military means, would take a long time to end.⁹³

2.2. The push for a separate peace in the West

‘What is French should stay French, what is Belgian should stay Belgian, and what is German should stay German’⁹⁴

A push for negotiations in the West began before the actual large-scale fighting as the Germans tried to persuade the Belgians into an agreement which would give the German army the right of passage through their territory. The ultimatum that was sent to the Belgian government did offer some guarantees that were thought to make it somewhat palatable for the Belgian state and people. These consisted of guarantees for all Belgian territory and possessions, the evacuation of all German armed forces when hostilities ceased and the compensation for all damages that would be suffered by the Belgians.⁹⁵ This proposal was, despite the guarantees, promptly rejected on the grounds that it would severely compromise the territorial integrity and thereby the legitimacy of the Belgian state. This refusal of the Belgian state to cooperate with the passage of the German armed forces had not been entirely unexpected. This can, for example, be seen in von Schlieffen’s memorandum and subsequent iterations of the war plans based on this memorandum.⁹⁶

Even though military planners had, although not universally, expected Belgium to deny territorial access in theory, many Germans outside these circles were shocked at the refusal of the German terms by Belgium. Especially since many thought that it would be

⁹³ Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*, 207.

⁹⁴ Quote from SPD-politician Philip Scheidemann (October 1916) found in Watson, *Ring of steel*, 261. This statement is indicative of the moderate attitude of the SPD-leadership towards the West, and their general agreement of a return to status-quo in the West. This was however not the same in the East, where the SPD-leadership was much less opposed to territorial changes to ‘liberate subject peoples from Russian oppression’.

⁹⁵ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to war in 1914* (London 2013) 549.

⁹⁶ Alfred Graf von Schlieffen ‘*Krieg gegen Frankreich*’ (December 1905). Retrieved from: https://www.1000dokumente.de/index.html?c=dokument_de&dokument=0097_spl&object=translation&l=de (Consulted on 24-06-2022).

likely that France would move through Belgium either by agreement or force if they did not agree to these German terms.⁹⁷ Additionally, Belgian neutrality would, according to many Germans, only be enforced by Britain if it would be breached by Germany and that the English would have never taken the same repercussions if France had breached it.⁹⁸ Therefore, the terms that were offered should, according to many German newspapers, have convinced the Belgians to just step aside from the conflict.⁹⁹

After this refusal a bloody invasion of Belgium began, which slowed down the German advance considerably due to the heavy fortresses and stout resistance of the Belgian army. Six days later after heavy fighting and the fall of Liège the previous offer to the Belgian government would be repeated.¹⁰⁰ But the Belgian king rejected this offer as well, the reasoning of the foreign ministry and king of Belgium for this refusal was that voluntary submission to the Germans would invalidate their policy of neutrality. The persistence of the German foreign service to conclude some sort of deal with the Belgians would not end here as there would once again be new negotiations in 1915 and 1916. These negotiations consisted of four secret negotiations between emissaries of Belgium and Germany.¹⁰¹ During these preliminary negotiations the German demands were increased as there were now calls for more economic integration and the stationing of German troops at some strategic positions in Belgium itself. The Belgians emissaries and king showed considerable interest in these terms if they would get compensated in the form of French or Dutch territory. Eventually the possibility for an agreement disappeared as there had been leaks before the two nations could talk more seriously about the demands of both sides. There was an immediate halt to the negotiations after the leaks created massive public backlash in Belgium and triggered a stern statement of the Entente powers to the Belgium government.¹⁰²

Although these negotiations would thus never advanced to an advanced stage, which would have revealed the real minimum terms of each side to reach an agreement, the diplomatic communication did give an indication of the outline of demands of both sides. The discussion in Germany on the fate of Belgium was quite diverse and ranged from annexation

⁹⁷ ‘Gegen Russland, Frankreich, England! Die Englische Kriegserklärung’ *Berliner Volkszeitung* (August 5, 1914).; This suspicion had some basis in reality as the French plan XVII did plan for a possible invasion of Germany through Belgium.

⁹⁸ ‚Abrechnung des Reichskanzlers mit England‘ *Vossische Zeitung* (Morning Edition) (14 September 1914).; There had actually been discussions on an invasion of Belgium by the French military for a long time, but the chances that these would have actually been implemented were rather small.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ Jean Stengers, ‘Belgium’ in Keith Wilson Decisions for war, 1914, *The English Historical Review*, 112 (1997)151-174, there 164.

¹⁰¹ Fischer: *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 216.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, 222.

of strategic parts of Belgium including coastal cities, to the full integrity of Belgian territory. The one thing that was talked generally agreed upon in discussion on was that Belgium was of vital importance to German security against the English and that the Belgian state could not be in the sphere of influence of Great Britain.¹⁰³

Unlike Belgium, individual peace negotiations with France after the outbreak of war were only undertaken after the failed Battle of the Marne, and even after this shift these peace feelers were minor in comparison with others. The reason for this being that France saw the conflict in existential terms, especially since the conflict now took place in Northern France, and this prevented the few peace feelers who tried reaching out to the Radical Socialists and the politician Joseph Caillaux to have any effect. These plans for negotiations with the French opposition were thus doomed to fail from the start.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, the demands that France put forward in public were already categorically rejected by the German newspapers and while most of the articles did not think that giving Belgian territory back would be a dealbreaker, the transfer of the German province of Elzas-Lothringen was seen as an unacceptable concession for peace negotiations, even for the more moderate elements like the SPD.¹⁰⁵

2.3. The push for a separate peace in the East

Early in the war the Russians had threatened Prussia and occupied German land, but this had changed rapidly after the Russian army had suffered immense losses in the battles of the Masurian lakes and Tannenberg. This success of the German army in the East in combination with the descent into trench warfare in the West made the prospect of pursuing a separate peace with Russia an increasingly attractive option. This option became even more alluring as an increasing amount of German political and military leaders concluded that a two-front war would almost certainly lead to a German defeat. This popularity would lead to a plethora of peace offerings and diplomatic discussions.¹⁰⁶ In the first eight months alone Germany approached Russia with three serious proposals for a separate peace.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ An good example of the multiplicity of articles that discuss this is: 'Kriegziele im Westen' *Jenaische Zeitung* (13 December 1916, First Edition); The scholar Dan Reiter discusses how a majority of the German leaders felt that they would remain vulnerable if Belgium stayed in the orbit of England. Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton 2009).

¹⁰⁴ Fischer: *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 225; Lancelot Farrar, Opening to The West: German Efforts to conclude a Separate peace with England July 1917 - March 1918. *Canadian Journal of History*, 10(1), 73.

¹⁰⁵ 'Hirngespinnste über einen Sonderfrieden' *Vossische Zeitung* (January 1st, 1915); Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 261.

¹⁰⁶ Lancelot Farrar. Carrot and stick: German efforts to conclude a separate peace with Russia, November 1914-december 1915. *East European Quarterly*, 10(2), (1976), 153,154.

¹⁰⁷ Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*, 275.

One of the most important channels of these initial peace proposals were neutral nations like Denmark. The kingdom of Denmark used their contact in Russia to convey German messages, the focus here was still on the dynastic ties and the Tsar as the main decision-making figure. Therefore, the Tsar became the main target of diplomatic pressure to put an end to the war on the Eastern front. Both newspapers and the majority of the political and military elite believed that the Tsar and the majority of the Russian population was open to offers of peace and that the only true obstacle was the existence of the powerful war party in Russia that prevented this as of yet.¹⁰⁸ It was additionally stated that England could fight on without France, but that it could not do this without Russia.¹⁰⁹ The perceived willingness of Russia to diplomatic negotiations was further confirmed by optimistic German intelligence reports in January and February 1915, which stated that the Russian state and armed forces were becoming increasingly unstable. This in combination with the announcement of the liberation of the last parts of East-Prussian territory by Hindenburg and Ludendorff strengthened the case that a peace offer would eventually be accepted by the Russians.¹¹⁰ The reality was however that the intelligence on the perceived willingness of the Russian Tsar and the Russian population to conclude peace turned out to be incorrect.

The preference of von Bethmann-Hollweg had since November 1914 been to remain flexible and not to make extensive demands to create opportunities to negotiate a separate peace with one or multiple nations.¹¹¹ Together with Falkenhayn and the Kaiser this policy of flexibility and low demands was used to try and tempt the Russians to the table. While the first few letters that were sent through the Danish connection were completely without demands and only used to probe and make contact, subsequent letters in March 1915 offered concrete terms.¹¹² The terms that were offered consisted of some small territorial concessions along the Eastern border as a buffer as well as the implementation of commercial and financial treaties between the nations.¹¹³ In spite of the efforts to make the offer as attractive as possible, the Danish intermediaries informed the Germans that these terms were promptly rejected by both the Tsar and the minister of foreign affairs of Russia. Which further confirm that the assertions of the intelligence reports and newspapers turned out to be false and had ultimately overestimated the chances of a peace with Russia.

¹⁰⁸ 'Friedenswunsche des Zaren' *Berliner Abendpost* (January 1st, 1915).

¹⁰⁹ 'Russisches Bekenntnis' *Vossische Zeitung* (February 11th, 1915).

¹¹⁰ Paul von Hindenburg, *Out of my life*. (1921, London), 159; Farrar, *Carrot and stick*, 158.

¹¹¹ David Stevenson, (1991) The failure of peace by negotiation in 1917. *The historical journal*, 34, 70.

¹¹² Farrar, *Carrot and stick*, 156.

¹¹³ Cities like Warsaw were not demanded, it focused strictly on strips of land; Farrar, *Carrot and stick*, 160.

After the refusal of this offer the focus gravitated more towards the plans of the military leaders Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who had argued since the beginning of negotiations that the only way that Russia would come to the table was through severe military defeats. But although the German army had managed to expulse the Russian army from Prussia and managed to conquer a foothold into Russian-Poland, they had been unable to put further pressure on the Russian empire. And since they had not accepted any proposal until now, it would thus be unlikely for them to change their mind now that their front was stabilised. Besides this, the German offensive had failed to destroy the Russian capabilities, which meant that the Russians maintained the option to initiate another offensive. It was therefore likely that the Russians would keep trying to push for a breakthrough, which shows that they were not looking to end the war.¹¹⁴

Despite increasing pessimism, hopeful signs from a Japanese minister rekindled hopes for a peace with Russia which would additionally include a treaty with Japan.¹¹⁵ These hopeful signs consisted of the talks of Japanese minister Ushida on the re-orientation of Japan.¹¹⁶ Immediately after the German foreign office got wind of the statements of minister Ushida, diplomatic efforts were undertaken to pursue this possibility. In a conversation on May the 7th 1915 the Japanese government agreed in principle to start secret negotiations. These negotiations made many important figures in the German military elite like the admiral Alfred von Tirpitz very interested in a peace of Germany with Russia and Japan.¹¹⁷ Von Tirpitz saw a possibility for a kind of anti-Anglo-Saxon coalition as all three countries had conflicting interests with Great Britain.¹¹⁸ In the conversations that followed, Japan demanded German possessions in the East like the Pacific Islands and the German territory of Kiachow in China.¹¹⁹ Eventually there was widescale acceptance of these terms by the German government as long as Japan could get Russia on-board with these negotiations. The readiness of much of the political and military elite to accept these terms is a sign that many German leaders had high hopes for these negotiations. However, the negotiations had come to an immediate standstill when the Japanese forced these negotiations to go on publicly and be aimed at a general peace instead of the separate peace, which German leaders at that time,

¹¹⁴ The Russians would in 1916 undertake another grand offensive into Austria-Hungary which managed to achieve some great initial successes.

¹¹⁵ Fischer: *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 228.

¹¹⁶ Erwin Hölzle 'Deutschland und die Wegschneide des ersten Weltkrieges' in *Geschichtliche Kräfte und Entscheidungen*, Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Otto Becker (Wiesbaden, 1954), 272.

¹¹⁷ Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen*, (Leipzig, 1919), 270.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁹ Fischer: *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 229.

found both more promising and beneficial to their position. Eventually there was a draft version in which there was agreement on Japanese demands and proposed territorial exchanges between the Central Powers and Russia like the ceding of Poland by Russia in exchange for Armenia and free passage through the Turkish Straits. Despite this concrete draft version these negotiations would ultimately not lead to anything.¹²⁰

The sheer number of proposals aimed at Russia and the support for these initiatives in the highest circles of government shows that there was plenty of motivation for the conclusion of peace. But the reliance on hopeful assertions like the supposed willingness of the Tsar to commit to peace, and the thought that the Russians would ultimately not be able to sustain the casualties that were caused by both the German offence and defence, were found not to be accurate. This eventually led to the constant failure of these proposals and the overestimation of the actual possibilities. The Russians were, counter to German assumptions, not showing any serious signs of wanting to come to an agreement. Only when the conditions were much worse and Russia was on the edge of collapsing entirely would they come to the table, which is later shown by the treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918), whereby they accepted terms that were significantly worse than the ones offered in 1914 to 1916. This shows that the willingness of the Russians to continue fighting was quite disconnected from the terms that the Germans offered.

¹²⁰ Ibidem, 232.

3. The push for a general peace

With the failure of the push for a separate peace and the prospect of a victory by purely military means beginning to look increasingly less likely, the calls for more general peace negotiations began to grow substantially.¹²¹ Especially the exhaustion that was beginning to set in was a strong motivator for this course. This would lead to two major peace initiatives. On the 12th of December a peace note from the Central Powers was sent which proposed peace, and although German allies were involved it was the German government that truly pushed the initiative.¹²² The German foreign office felt that now was the time to negotiate, as the Central Powers had made some progress in the Balkan with the conquest of Bucharest which strengthened their weak bargaining position. However, in stark contrast to the hopeful mood in Germany, which was illustrated by the wide enthusiasm in newspapers and in the speeches of politicians, the Entente answered rapidly and shot the idea down.¹²³ The answers were, to the anger of many Germans, filled with accusations and demands which ultimately did much to harm the idea that there was a possibility of a conciliatory mood in both alliances. After the failed peace note of December 1916, there was renewed hope for peace via the papacy. This started with an appeal to the warring countries on the first of August, which was then answered by the foreign service with an outline which left space open for a restoration of Belgium if safeguards for the German state could be negotiated.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, the previous dismissal of the December 1916 general peace offer had weakened the groups that advocated for peace and changed the mind of figures like the Kaiser, who was now predominantly sceptical on the chance of a negotiated peace.¹²⁵ In the end the replacement of Bethmann-Hollweg, Georg Michaelis, under the influence of the military high command, rescinded the concessions that his predecessor had made. This in combination with U.S. reluctance to participate in the negotiations would in turn lead to the rapid collapse of the talks.

¹²¹ Stevenson, *The failure of peace by negotiation in 1917*, 67.

¹²² Esther Caukin Braunauer, The peace proposals of December 1916-january 1917, *The Journal of Modern History* 4/4 (December 1932), pp. 544-571.

¹²³ 'Wir Reichen die Hand Zum Frieden!' *Berliner Morgenpost* (18 December 1916).

¹²⁴ Fisher: *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 418.

¹²⁵ Charles Herber, Eugenio Pacelli's Mission to Germany and the Papal Peace Proposals of 1917. *The Catholic Historical Review*, 65(1), (1979). 20-48, 26.

3.1. The peace note of 1916

‘Der furchtbarste Krieg, den die Geschichte je gesehen hat...’¹²⁶

In 1916 victory remained elusive, as both sides continued to suffer extreme losses without being able to create any decisive breakthroughs. Both sides also knew that they would not be able to replace these losses as both the will of the population and the financial means were rapidly degrading. In the light of all these struggles, the Central Powers under the military leadership of Germany improved their situation considerably vis-à-vis the Entente in the final months of 1916. This turnaround had happened after months of Entente successes with both the highly successful Brusilov offensive and the entry of another country on the side of the Entente. This streak of successes had however abruptly halted as the Germans had managed to both stall the Brusilov offensive by assisting the Austro-Hungarians and conquer Bucharest which de facto knocked Romania out of the war. This improving military situation was seen as a good time for the Germans to open renewed peace negotiations through an appeal for a general peace, as the risk of it looking like a sign of weakness and not being taken serious decreased in the eyes of the German government. This fear of the peace offer being perceived as a sign of weakness can also be clearly seen in the rhetorical style of the note, which stressed the position of strength that the Central powers were in at this time. Nevertheless, the successive peace note had deliberately been devoid of any war aims, which was both a way to heighten the chances that it would succeed and a continuation of the policy of flexibility that von Bethmann-Hollweg had practiced since November 1914.¹²⁷

PROPOSALS FOR PEACE NEGOTIATIONS MADE BY GERMANY. ¹²⁸

‘December 12, 1916, the most formidable war known to history has been ravaging for two and a half years in a great part of the world. That catastrophe, that the bonds of a common civilization more than a thousand years old could not stop, strikes mankind in its most precious patrimony; it threatens to bury under its ruins the moral and physical progress on which Europe prided itself at the dawn of the twentieth century. In that strife Germany and her allies—Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey have given proof of their indestructible strength in winning considerable successes at war. Their unshakable lines resist ceaseless attacks of their enemies' arms. The recent diversion in the Balkans was speedily and victoriously thwarted. The latest events have demonstrated that a continuation of the war

¹²⁶ Opening line of the peace note of 1916, found in Piloty, *Das Friedensangebot der mittelmächte*, 2.

¹²⁷ David Stevenson, (1991) *The failure of peace by negotiation in 1917. The historical journal*, 34, 70.

¹²⁸ Full translation of the peace note in: James Brown, Scott: *Official statements of war aims and peace proposals, December 1916 to November 1918*. No. 31. (Washington 1921) 2 & 3.

cannot break their resisting power. The general situation much rather justifies their hope of fresh successes. It was for the defence of their existence and freedom of their national development that the four allied Powers were constrained to take up arms. The exploits of their armies have brought no change therein. Not for an instant have they swerved from the conviction that the respect of the rights of the other nations is not in any degree incompatible with their own rights and legitimate interests. They do not seek to crush or annihilate their adversaries. Conscious of their military and economic strength and ready to carry on to the end, if they must, the struggle that is forced upon them, but animated at the same time by the desire to stem the flood of blood and to bring the horrors of war to an end, the four allied Powers propose to enter even now into peace negotiations. They feel sure that the propositions which they would bring forward and which would aim to assure the existence, honour, and free development of their peoples, would be such as to serve as a basis for the restoration of a lasting peace. If notwithstanding this offer of peace and conciliation the struggle should continue, the four allied Powers are resolved to carry it on to a victorious end, while solemnly disclaiming any responsibility before mankind and history.’

This offer could, however, not convince the Entente powers as they rejected the call for negotiations outright. Their internal deliberations indicate that the Entente was far more concerned in the articulation of the rejection notes, than in interacting with the proposal itself.¹²⁹ The reasoning given for this outright rejection were legion, but a couple of these were dominant in the communication of the Entente powers.¹³⁰ These recurring demands consisted of the following statements:

- I: Germany is wholly responsible for the outbreak of the war and must first recognise this.
- II: The advantage of any peace proposal will be to the benefit of the attacker which has shown that he cannot defeat the Entente.
- III: We have started this war with specific goals on the universality of rights and will not end it before these are met.
- IV: We will not agree to being forced into a German peace.
- V: No peace is possible without complete restitution, full reparation, and effectual guarantees.
- VI: The war is most likely a trick, just like the proposals of despots in the past.

¹²⁹ Lanoszka & Hunzeker, 'Rage of honor', 663.

¹³⁰ Robert Piloty. *Das Friedensangebot der mittelmächte* (Tübingen, 1917), 6; James Brown, Scott: *Official statements of war aims and peace proposals, December 1916 to November 1918*. No. 31. (Washington, 1921), 17.

In the subsequent English note, besides the above stated, there are many accusations of Germany only offering peace as a trick and the militarist and despotic character of the German people.¹³¹ Which is an indication that the English government had no interest at all in talking to the German government, as the delegitimization of the German leaders like the Kaiser seemed to imply that they should first need to step down before the English would be willing to negotiate any type of peace deal. Aforementioned, in combination with leaving all the occupied territories without any guarantees or binding talks are both unreasonable and unrealistic demands, as vacating all these zones would make Germany especially vulnerable in the case of the failure of negotiations at a later time. Moreover, the French framed the offer as a sign of weakness, and as a sign that Germany knew that it was losing and was only trying to conclude peace to avert this loss.¹³² Nobody saw the offer for what it was: an genuine attempt at negotiating an end to the war, only made possible by tough negotiations with fierce opposition in Germany and marred by compromises with its opponents.¹³³ Speeches and notes like those of the French and British government did much to take the wind out of the sail, of not only the domestic groups favouring peace, but it made the position of proponents of peace in Germany much less tenable as well. Because coming to the table did not entail any serious risk to either the English or the French, this outright rejection could be seen as a way to block any attempts for negotiating any form of peace. Additionally, by framing the German Empire as a country that was irredeemably aggressive and untrustworthy, the Entente had created a narrative to continue the war. This narrative is historically speaking very effective in the dismantling of any chance for peace, as framing the opponent as irredeemably aggressive and untrustworthy creates a situation wherein there is no choice other than fighting to the finish.¹³⁴

Another important accusation was the presence of Prussian militarism in German society, which, according to the Entente newspapers and notes, had led the Germans to commit war crimes. This view had been present since the start of the conflict and seemed to many Germans as just an easy way of rejecting peace overtures. The reason for this was that the so-called Prussian militarism was not so different from French, English or Russian militarism, and is thus just a convenient excuse to continue fighting.¹³⁵ Furthermore, the focus

¹³¹ Piloty. *Das Friedensangebot der mittelmächte*, 8 & 9.

¹³² This stance can be seen for example in the speech of Aristide Briand to the chamber of deputies of the 13th of December 1916, which can be found in: Scott: *Official statements of war aims and peace proposals*, 7.

¹³³ Zeman, *A diplomatic history of the First World War*, (Introduction) X.

¹³⁴ This theory can be found in: Alex Wiesiger, *Logics of War: Explanations for limited and unlimited wars* (New York 2013).

¹³⁵ 'Was ist Militarismus' *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (5 November, 1914, Morning Edition); Piloty. *Das Friedensangebot der mittelmächte*, 45.

on German war crimes and the subsequent complete denial of any wrongdoing of the Entente powers in either the run-up or the course of the war worsened the already present divisions between the populations and governments of Germany and the Entente.

Considering the complete stalemate in 1916, the immediate rejection of the offer by the Entente had no rational basis. For Great Britain the prompt rejection of the offer seems to be primarily caused by the perceived challenge to British hegemony and honour.¹³⁶ As the war progressed this supposed challenge to British honour led British politicians to the conclusion that only the destruction of the current German empire would suffice as the condition to end the war.¹³⁷ Concretely, this meant that any space for a possible understanding between Great Britain and the German empire was eliminated in favour of a fight to the finish. This is further illustrated by the minutes of the British War committee, which allude to a fixation on German casualties and morale, but an indifference to the British casualties.¹³⁸ This means that they would not factor in one of the most important elements that would make concluding peace an increasingly prudent option.

After the rejection of the peace note of 1916, the credibility of von Bethmann-Hollweg and the elements in German society that argued for a negotiated peace decreased significantly.¹³⁹ Thereby the political power of the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL/ Supreme Military Command) under von Hindenburg and Ludendorff gained a significant amount of legitimacy as they offered the only credible alternative.¹⁴⁰ This alternative to a peace of understanding consisted of the *Siegfrieden*, which entailed forcing the Entente to agree to peace through overwhelming military pressure. Unrestricted submarine warfare (Hereafter referred to as USW) had already become an essential element of this strategy, and with the failure of the general peace offer, the support for this weapon in both the *Reichstag* and the public was sufficient to implement it.¹⁴¹ The proponents could now say that the risks of USW far outweighed the costs, as the only alternative in their framing was the continuation of the war of attrition. Therefore, these more extreme means seemed necessary to an increasingly large part of the country considering the circumstances.¹⁴²

¹³⁶ See for example the statements of the British secretary of state at the start of the conflict: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1914/aug/03/statement-by-sir-edward-grey> (Consulted on 18-06-2022).

¹³⁷ Lanoszka & Hunzeker, 'Rage of honor', 663.

¹³⁸ Ibidem, 675.

¹³⁹ Lancelot Farrar, Opening to the West German Efforts to Conclude a Separate Peace with England, July 1917—March 1918. *Canadian Journal of History*, 10(1), (1975). 73-90, 73.

¹⁴⁰ From here on out I will be referring to the supreme military command as the OHL (Oberste Heeresleitung).

¹⁴¹ Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 280.

¹⁴² Lancelot Farrar. "Separate Peace - General Peace - Total War: The Crisis in German Policy during the Spring of 1917" *Militaergeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1976, pp. 51-80, 53.

3.2. Peace through the Papacy

On the first of August Pope Benedict XV issued an appeal to peace to all the belligerents. In this appeal, the Pope stated a few concrete goals that should, in his opinion, make peace possible.¹⁴³ Firstly, the papacy advocated a negotiated reduction of armaments to decrease tension which followed the great arms races between the great powers of Europe. Secondly, the papacy argued for an international court of arbitration, which would help in peacefully resolving issues through law and international pressure. Finally, the papal appeal stated that all participants should leave all occupied territories and colonies.¹⁴⁴ The countries would thereby be substantially freed of the pressure of annexationist elements as all countries had to give up their gained territories.

This seven-points-memorandum had been drafted after hopeful exploratory talks with von Bethmann-Hollweg wherein he had stated that two of the most important hurdles to peace could be solved. These two main hurdles to peace had come to the surface in prior talks with Great Britain and France. The first major issue was Belgium, on which Bethmann-Hollweg agreed that it could completely be restored to its independence as long as there were some guarantees that it would not fall completely under the political, military or economic dominance of either France or Great Britain. The second main hurdle on which Bethmann-Hollweg agreed to make concessions was the Elzas-Lothringen province, on which he agreed that some border concessions could take place.¹⁴⁵ With these major complications for peace out of the way, or so it seemed, Pope Benedict XV set into motion the process of peace negotiations.

In the meantime, the peace movement in Germany had put increasing pressure on the government in the *Reichstag* to act on the significant pressure for peace from within the country.¹⁴⁶ Two key figures from the largest parties in Germany, Philip Scheidemann a key figure in the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) and Matthias Erzberger from the catholic *Zentrum Partei*, advocated for a peace resolution in the Reichstag. This so-called July-resolution was designed as a statement for peace and consisted of a statement that Germany exclusively fought a defensive war, and that it favoured a 'peace of understanding'.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, this resolution served to push the successor of von

¹⁴³ Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 417

¹⁴⁴ Charles Herber, Eugenio Pacelli's Mission to Germany and the Papal Peace Proposals of 1917. *The Catholic Historical Review*, 65(1), (1979). 20-48, 29 & 30.

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem, 24; Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, *Betrachtungen zum Weltkriege* (Berlin, 1921) 210-213.

¹⁴⁶ See for example this news article in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* for the support for peace in both the population and socialist politicians 'Hin und Her' *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (9th of May 1917) ;

¹⁴⁷ John Snell, Benedict XV, Wilson, Michaelis, and German Socialism. *The Catholic Historical Review*, 37(2) (1951), 151-178,153.

Bethmann-Hollweg to seriously engage in the Papal offer of peace, as the loss of the support of these two main parties could undermine his position.

Beside the Pressure in the *Reichstag*, the pressure for an end to the war could also be seen clearly in the newspapers. Despite the disillusionment from the failed general peace proposal of 1916 the discussion on peace were still very present, so much so that the successor to Michaelis had urged the populace to refrain from ‘political nervousness’.¹⁴⁸ In the same article Michaelis promised to engage any serious opportunity for peace, as he was aware of the longing for peace in the German population after three years of war.¹⁴⁹

Despite the pressure of the July-resolution and the population, the departure of von Bethmann-Hollweg and the increasing influence of Hindenburg and Ludendorff pushed Michaelis towards non-commitment. Hindenburg and Ludendorff had at this time gained so much influence in German policymaking that they were able to use Michaelis as a useful instrument to undermine the peace negotiations. This was further illustrated by his inaugural address in which he stated that he regarded the July-resolution as a ‘resolution as I conceive it’, which showed that Michaelis did not intend to truly engage with the concepts for a peace of understanding as it was pushed by Zentrum and the SPD. The agreements on Belgium and Elzas-Lothringen that von Bethmann-Hollweg had made were quietly rescinded in a conference on the 9th of August, and with that the basis on which the Pope had been optimistic largely disappeared. Because the OHL had managed to use Michaelis to sabotage the negotiations, they were able to significantly lower the chances that they would have to make the concessions that they did not agree with. Furthermore, the push for the failure of the peace negotiations by the OHL was a clever way in which they could take the wind out of the sails of the peace party and subsequently ignore the pressure for negotiations which was created by the July-resolution. The final nail to the coffin of the Papal peace efforts however would not be the sabotage of the German high command, it was rather the outright rejection of the U.S. president Woodrow Wilson to proceed with these negotiations that truly ended any hope for the papal peace proposal.¹⁵⁰

4. Breakdown

‘...We will not have a peace of starvation! In order to attain a speedy peace, we must follow Hindenburg’s command and keep our nerve...’¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ ‘Der Kanzler gegen Politische Nervosität’ *Vossische Zeitung* (2 August 1917).

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁰ John Snell, *Benedict XV, Wilson, Michaelis, and German Socialism*, 161.

¹⁵¹ Line from the founding declaration of the Fatherland party in which they attack the pro-peace politicians from Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora*, 662.

In the final months of 1916 and the start of 1917 German institutions began to lose an increasing amount of their credibility. This loss of credibility had primarily been caused by both the failure to end the war in a short timeframe and the repeated failures of peace initiatives that had been undertaken.¹⁵² The leadership gap that consequently arose was eagerly filled by the military leaders Ludendorff and Hindenburg. With the successful defence of Eastern-Prussia and the defeat of the Russians at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes, these two men had gained a national following, which enabled them to garner the power and legitimacy to acquire leadership positions and shape German foreign policy. With this shift of power came a simultaneous shift in policy as it became primarily driven by the exigencies of war.¹⁵³ One of the most influential decisions of the OHL was the implementation of unrestricted submarine warfare, which was presented by the military leadership and certain politicians as the only way to force Great Britain to the table. The policy would manage to achieve this goal by starving the British of the much-needed food imports which would then go on to compromise both their war effort and morale. Another important shift was the change of war aims and the territorial changes that were increasingly getting framed as a necessity. This framing would ultimately come to fruition after the armistice in the East of December 1917. The subsequent treaty of Brest-Litovsk would be used by the German state to force through a whole list of demands that would push the Russian state back East and create a German-dominated Poland and Baltic region. In the spirit of this dictate like peace treaty the subsequent surrender of the Germans with the Treaty of Versailles resulted in a list of demands from the Entente powers.

4.1. A shift in power

Since the beginning of the conflict, it had been crucial to unify the German public and secure their support for the war effort. To achieve this, the German government had at the beginning of the war pursued a successful campaign which had managed to bridge some of the divisions in society. This policy of an internal truce or *Burgfrieden* as it was called, had managed to convince all German parties to support war credits and refrain from actions against the government like strikes. The way in which the government succeeded in this bridging of the gaps and the creation of a largely unified German front against the Entente was by framing the war as a defensive war and one that could be won in a short timeframe. Especially the defensive war narrative was immensely successful as the invasions of the Russians in the East

¹⁵² Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 375.

¹⁵³ Erich Ludendorff, *My War Memories*, volume II, (London, 1919) 409-410.

provided an extremely effective unifying force.¹⁵⁴ In contrast to the effective and lasting defensive war narrative, the argument that the war would be short and decisive turned out to be an illusion. Because of the failure of the German armed forces to achieve a victory decisively and rapidly, and the consequent problems that this war caused in the country, it became progressively harder for the German government to retain their credibility. This problem would be intensified by the repeated hopes for peace which eventually all ended in a disappointment. This combination of factors would lead to cracks in the internal peace and the fall of important moderate figures in German politics like von Bethmann-Hollweg.¹⁵⁵ Especially the peace note in December of 1916 would ultimately be very damaging for the reputation of the chancellor, as this offer had been the product of a hard struggle between the chancellor and the OHL.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, the note itself was framed as a sort of last resort because of these hard negotiations, with the last lines forming a warning that they would continue fighting if negotiations would not take place. The support that Bethmann-Hollweg still enjoyed rapidly melted away however when the negative replies began to come in. Even figures like Wilhelm II, who at that time still had influence, grew angry and proclaimed his support for fighting on and subduing Belgium and France.¹⁵⁷

The leadership gap that sprang up because of the loss of credibility, was subsequently filled by the military leaders Ludendorff and Hindenburg. These military commanders had achieved fame through their successful defence of Eastern-Prussia with the battles of the Masurian Lakes and Tannenberg. In these battles, they had achieved exactly what had failed on the Western front, namely the setting up and winning of decisive battles. Although these battles had ultimately not succeeded in knocking the Russians out of the war, they would continue to play an important role in keeping up the morale of the German people and propelling the careers of the men that were seen as responsible for this victory. Part of the reason that these battles had such a seminal role is because they were seen as illustrative for the defensive struggle of Germany against the Russians.

After the repeated failures of peace negotiations, the only alternative that was offered to end the war and make sure that Germany would not be humiliated, was the ideal of a *Siegfrieden*. This *Siegfrieden* consisted of a peace that would be forced on the enemy by

¹⁵⁴ 'Volk und beamte' *Königsberger Hartungsche Zeitung* (27th of August 1914 Morning Edition).

¹⁵⁵ Robert Hopwood, Czernin and the fall of Bethmann-Hollweg, *Canadian Journal of History*, issue: II (1967) 49-61, 49.

¹⁵⁶ Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm*, 324.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

military means and the disposal of the ideal of a status quo ante.¹⁵⁸ Both Ludendorff and Hindenburg posited that a total victory through military and thus the *Siegfrieden* could still be achieved through USW against the British and additional pressure on the Eastern front.¹⁵⁹ As the OHL could now effectively frame their idea of a *Siegfrieden* as the only credible alternative, they rapidly gained power and influence. This, in turn, was used to implement something very close to a military dictatorship in Germany.¹⁶⁰ With this shift towards a quasi-dictatorship and the idea that the plans of Ludendorff and Hindenburg were the only way to save Germany from the abyss, military and annexationist plans that were previously untenable now became accepted by larger parts of the population and political elite. The industrialist Duisberg in a conversation with Bethmann-Hollweg stated for example: ‘What Germany needs in its darkest hour is a strongman, who alone can save us from the abyss’¹⁶¹ According to an increasing number of Germans, peace through diplomacy had been tried, but a reasonable peace could now only be realised through war.¹⁶² And neither Bethmann-Hollweg nor the Kaiser were seen as figures that could fill this role as a strongman.¹⁶³

Even the Kaiser increasingly became a shadow figure, as the position of him as a kingmaker, which was one of the only real ways in which he could still influence things, was almost non-existent after he was pressured to stop supporting Bethmann-Hollweg.¹⁶⁴ And although the emperor was still presented as having a say in military affair in newspapers, his real influence was already negligible as the OHL had managed to blackmail the Kaiser by threatening to resign on the 10th of July. This threat to resign finally managed to isolate the emperor enough to force him to agree to pretty much anything the OHL proposed. This is most clearly seen by the appointment of Georg Michaelis, as all previous chancellors had been people he had personal relations with. In stark contrast the new chancellor was one he had no personal relationship with and one which had been picked by the OHL.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁸ Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 234.

¹⁵⁹ David Stevenson, The failure of peace by negotiation in 1917. *The historical journal*, (1991) 34, 70.

¹⁶⁰ Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 232.

¹⁶¹ Cited from a speech on the 6th of February of 1916 of the industrialist Duisberg to Bethmann-Hollweg in Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600-1947*, (London 2007) 1743, [e-book].

¹⁶² Telegram from the King of Bayern, 14th of January 1917, found in piloty: Das Friedensangebot der Mittelmächte.

¹⁶³ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁴ Dassen, *Sprong in het duister*, 94.

¹⁶⁵ Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm*, 332.



Figure 2. Wilhelm II with Hindenburg and Ludendorff. Published in the Hamburger Fremdenblatt (31st of January 1917).

4.2. Unrestricted submarine warfare

On January the 31st the policy of USW was implemented. Concretely, this meant that any vessel, be it from a belligerent or a neutral power, would become a target. The reasoning for this was that the supplies that Great Britain was receiving via sea routes was the main cause that the British could continue the war, and the way that the current limitations worked prevented the German navy from being able to do anything about this while the British were able to starve Germany. The reason that the regular submarine effort was deemed insufficient was that the British used smuggling techniques, decoys, and neutral nations for supplies. This prevented the German navy from intercepting a significant amount of these supplies.

The policy of USW had been used before but had been rapidly ceased after a diplomatic backlash over the sinking of the Lusitania, a ship that was not only carrying

munitions, but also some 1200 passengers and crew including U.S. citizens.¹⁶⁶ After the incident with the *Lusitania* the policy of USW was shelved, but it continued to hang over German domestic politics as ‘the sword of Damocles’.¹⁶⁷ Every month that the war continued without an end in sight, in combination with the repeated failures of peace initiatives, made the case for a return to this policy stronger. In 1917 the support for the policy in combination with the growing influence of the OHL reached a critical mass and with this support the advocates succeeded in reinstating USW.¹⁶⁸

In the subsequent newspaper articles that confirmed the return of this policy of USW, direct references were made to the fact that Germany had tried to conclude peace in 1916, but that the situation was now so dire that Germany had no other choice but to implement this policy.¹⁶⁹

„Ihre Plane waren, wie sie in der Note von 12. Dezember 1916 ausdrücklich betonten, nicht auf die Zerschmetterung oder Vernichtung der Gegner gerichtet und nach ihrer Überzeugung mit den Rechten der anderen Nationen wohl vereinbar.“¹⁷⁰

The main reason for the return of USW, according to the article in the *Vossische Zeitung*, was to end the war as rapidly as possible to be able to stop the horrors of war like the ‘*Hungerungskrieg*’ which, as stated by the minister of foreign affairs Arthur Zimmerman were not aimed at the German armed forces, but rather at pressuring Germany into submission by starving women and children.¹⁷¹

Although desperation was the most important factor in this reinstatement of USW, the pressure to reinstate it was not based solely on emotion and desperation. A good example of this is the Holtzendorff memorandum of December 1916, in which the admiral Henning von Holtzendorff argued that through an extrapolation of the numbers from his personal experiences, it would be likely that the U-boats would sink around 600.000 tons of shipping which would force the British into a food and armaments crisis. This would ultimately force the British to conclude a peace.¹⁷² Expert opinions like this seemed to confirm the feasibility of the plan and would thereby make opposition against it much less tenable.

¹⁶⁶ Alan Travis, ‘Lusitania divers warned of danger from war munitions in 1982, papers reveal’ *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/01/lusitania-salvage-warning-munitions-1982> (1st of May 2014).

¹⁶⁷ Bethmann-Hollweg referred multiple times to unrestricted submarine warfare as the sword of Damocles.

¹⁶⁸ Esther Caukin Braunauer, The peace proposals of December 1916-january 1917, *The Journal of Modern History* 4/4 (December 1932), pp. 544-571, 545.

¹⁶⁹ ‘Die Note an Amerika’ *Vossische Zeitung* (1st of February 1917)

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁷¹ Ibidem.

¹⁷² Henning von Holtzendorff, *original memorandum* (22nd of december, 1916). Retrieved from: <http://www.gwpda.org/naval/holtzendorffmemo.htm> ([gwpda.org](http://www.gwpda.org))(Consulted 25-06-2022).

After the implementation of USW, the hopes in newspapers were high that the losses to British shipping with the use of submarines would achieve the desired results. Initially the optimistic newspapers articles about the tonnage of sunk British cargo seemed to confirm that the policy thus far appeared to be working.¹⁷⁴ This view had some basis in reality as the first few months in which this policy had been implemented showed a clear increase in the amount of sunk allied ships.¹⁷⁵

Months	Tonnage of total sunk shipping
February	381.854
March	446.652
April	572.762
May	407.837
Total	1.809.095

Table 1. Tonnage of sunk allied shipping ¹⁷³

Despite the backing of experts and prominent politicians, USW would turn out as one of the worst decisions of the entire war. Although it was not known at the time, it can be stated in hindsight that the Entente was on the edge of collapse even without the interception of additional supplies. This collapse would have eventually forced them to come to the table if the United States had not intervened. This collapse could be seen in every major participant on the side of the Entente. The English were almost bankrupt due to the high costs of maintaining their war effort, the war was costing about two million pounds a day, which meant concretely that Great Britain would have been bankrupt around March 1917 if they remained on the same course.¹⁷⁶ The French were simultaneously dealing with a breakdown in morale, which would continue to compromise their war effort going forwards, and plausibly lead to mass protests and uprisings in the spring and summer of 1917.¹⁷⁷ Lastly, the Russian empire was on the edge of a communist revolution which would demolish their will and ability to continue fighting. This would, as it did after the implementation of USW, have led to the agreement of the Russians to peace agreements.

The choice for USW in combination with the growing influence of the OHL showed that the peace party in German politics had lost significant ground. With the new leadership of the OHL came a simultaneous shift to more radical war aims. In contrast to the foreign policy aim of securing the Western and Eastern borders of Germany, which had been the guiding

¹⁷³ Stephen Roskill, *The U-Boat Campaign of 1917 and Third Ypres*, *Royal United Services Institution. Journal*, (1959) 104:616, 440-442.

¹⁷⁴ 'Die Wirkung des U-bootkrieges' *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (2nd of August 1917).

¹⁷⁵ Roskill, *The U-Boat Campaign of 1917 and Third Ypres*, 440.

¹⁷⁶ John Milton Cooper "The Command of Gold Reversed: American Loans to Britain, 1915-1917." *Pacific Historical Review* 45.2 (1976): 209-230, 219,220.

¹⁷⁷ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 417.

aim even when the situation degraded significantly, the new leadership developed considerably more aggressive war aims.¹⁷⁸ The OHL was not only focused on winning the current conflict, but rather thinking about creating an economic and territorial situation wherein Germany would not only be secure but also able to dominate in future wars. A good example of this is the treaty of Brest-Litovsk which stated the terms of the peace with Russia.

4.3. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

March 1917 would be the breaking point for the Russian empire. The combination of war fatigue, food shortages and political crisis caused a revolution in Russia that would force tsar Nicholas II to abdicate. The resulting turmoil caused mass confusion and desertion in the Russian armed forces, which strengthened the German military situation considerably.¹⁷⁹ Despite the willingness of the Russian politicians to fight on and stall any negotiations, these factors caused the Russians to finally agree to negotiations in December of 1917. During these negotiations the German diplomat Richard von Kühlmann and his Austro-Hungarian colleague Otto von Czernin first tried to turn the peace negotiations with Russia into a general peace conference. This offer consisted of a conditional commitment to refrain from annexations or indemnities if the other Entente powers would join Russia in peace talks. Knowing that this scenario was not likely, this offer would additionally serve to legitimise a treaty with harsh terms for Russia in the case that Russia could not convince its allies to join the negotiations.¹⁸⁰ Nonetheless, the OHL was outraged by this agreement to Bolshevik terms, as they wanted to dictate Russia harsh terms.¹⁸¹ With the subsequent refusal of the other Entente powers to join the negotiations Kühlmann and general Max Hoffmann started to demand self-determination for several Eastern-European and Baltic states and the annexation of others.¹⁸² The push for these states to be separated from Russia was based on both economic and political concerns, states like Ukraine and Poland would make sure that Germany did not border on Russia anymore, which solved the problems surrounding two-front wars. Besides the political considerations, the economic aspect was important to the German negotiators, as these new states could provide Germany with valuable trade contacts which would serve German economical domination in the East. The Russians were not in any position to be able to refuse these demands, which forced them to finally agree to German terms in March. Although the treaty of Brest-Litovsk would cost the Russian large swaths of

¹⁷⁸ Ibidem, 460.

¹⁷⁹ Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 245.

¹⁸⁰ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 493.

¹⁸¹ Ibidem.

¹⁸² Ibidem.

land and resources, it would not actually detach any ethnic Russians from the Russian state, it would instead detach many minority peoples that were earlier conquered and incorporated by the Russian empire.¹⁸³ It would nonetheless cripple the influence the Russian state could exert on continental Europe, and more generally its influence on the world stage.

The Russians had only concluded a peace when they were utterly exhausted and could not fight on, because of this they had to accept much harsher terms in comparison with the previous offers. This refusal to admit defeat and continued belief in the final victory was present in all belligerents and caused the war to go on much longer. The Russian case in particular shows that Russian aspirations instead of German conditions determined Russian decisions.¹⁸⁴ Most of the calculations that were made by the military and political elite were not based on the full scope of the war, it was rather based on whether the next offensive would finally achieve a breakthrough.¹⁸⁵ With this train of thought the cost of extra lives was always seen as a small contribution for the final victory. Only after the collapse of the country would the total cost of war become apparent.

While a majority in the Reichstag had agreed to the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the SPD abstained and the Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (USPD), which was a result of the splitting up of the SPD, voted against the treaty. Apart from the resistance in the Reichstag, workers in the country organised a wave of strikes against the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which illustrated the deep divisions in German society.¹⁸⁶ The way in which the political and military elite had managed to convince many Germans to go along with the Brest-Litovsk agreement was by playing into both the fears of the pre-war encirclement and desperation of the German people after several failed peace attempts and shortages of almost everything. Besides these factors, the leaked French plans to agree to the annexation of Eastern Prussia by Russia and the incorporation of Elzas-Lothringen with the borders of either 1790 or 1814 did much to legitimise the final dictate at Brest-Litovsk.¹⁸⁷

The newspapers were mostly enthusiastic about the '*Brotfrieden*' with Russia because it relieved the immediate critical situation and meant that the Eastern provinces were safe from the Russian armed forces.¹⁸⁸ In contrast to this enthusiasm over the restoration of

¹⁸³ Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 508.

¹⁸⁴ Farrar, *Carrot and stick*, 174.

¹⁸⁵ Stevenson, *The failure of peace by negotiation in 1917*, 66.

¹⁸⁶ Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 247.

¹⁸⁷ David Stevenson, "French war aims and the American challenge, 1914–1918." *The Historical Journal* 22,4 (1979): 877-894, 880; David Stevenson 'French war aims and Peace Planning' in M.F. Boemeke, G.D. Feldman and E. Glaser, *The Treaty of Versailles: A reassessment after 75 years*, (Washington D.C. & Cambridge, 1998) 93-101; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 464.

¹⁸⁸ 'Frieden mit Rusland' *Königsberger Hartungsche Zeitung* (4th of March 1918).

security in the East however, there was little faith in the chances of this treaty leading to either a rapid solution or peace treaty in the West.¹⁸⁹

4.4. The Treaty of Versailles

The treaty of Brest-Litovsk gave the German army one more, mostly imagined, chance to win the war. The conclusion of peace with the Russians freed up troops in the East which were subsequently moved to the Western front for the final desperate offensives. On the 21st of March 1918, the German armed forces undertook a massive surprise attack on British positions near St. Quentin and Amiens.¹⁹⁰ This offensive was initially successful in forcing a breakthrough, but the exhausted German army was unable to push their advantage. After the final failure of the 'Peace offensive' in the summer of 1918 in combination with the failure of the USW policy to bring Great Britain to the table, the entire German armed forces and the wider society began to breakdown.

On the 11th of November, after the country was forced by uprisings and the situation on the front to end the war, an armistice was signed. In the following talks at Versailles the German delegation had hoped that they could negotiate the terms of a German surrender in the spirit of the self-determination ideals that had been professed earlier in the war by the United States.¹⁹¹ The reality however was that Germany had no other alternative to these ideals and would thereby be forced to accept anything that the Entente powers demanded. The final surrender had therefore many similarities with the Russian surrender, just like the Russians the Germans now had to negotiate with no bargaining power. The only difference was that Germany had tried several times to end the war through diplomacy before the collapse. This situation caused the Entente powers to be able to demand what they wanted, as the German state could not threaten to fight on to limit these demands. France in particular had no intention of accepting anything other than the complete economic and political dissolution of the German state.¹⁹² While these extremely far-reaching French demands would eventually be somewhat reduced because of pressure from both Great-Britain and the United States, the eventual agreement would still be extremely harsh on Germany. The resulting disillusionment of this 'Diktat' would continue to influence German politics and eventually contribute to the outbreak of a second disastrous world war.

¹⁸⁹ 'Von Ost nach West' *Vossische Zeitung* (March 4 1918).

¹⁹⁰ Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 248.

¹⁹¹ See for example the fourteen points proposal by President Woodrow Wilson.

¹⁹² Boterman, *Moderne geschiedenis van Duitsland*, 265.

Conclusion

Germany went into the war in the belief that the war would be intense, but that it would be comparatively short and manageable. This way of thinking was not particularly driven by well thought out theories, instead it was a product of necessity. There were many strategists and politicians that were aware of the immediate dangers that a new war would bring, but they were not able to fully incorporate solutions to these dangers in their contingency plans. Instead, the Schlieffen plan remained the sole focus of the German military, even after it had no practical use anymore due to the failure to destroy the capabilities of the French army. Because there was no substitute for the Schlieffen plan, in combination with the slow descent of the conflict into a static bloodbath, German politicians and military leaders tried to find another way out of the catastrophe. These factors would eventually result in increasing pressure for the conclusion of the war through a peace initiative.

For these peace initiatives three distinct periods can be identified, the period of 1914 until the middle of 1916, the period of late 1916 to the middle of 1917, and finally the period of late 1917 until the Treaty of Versailles. In the first period there was a plethora of separate peace offers to several nations. The primary goal of these offers was specifically tailored to the needs of the German military. This can be seen in both the offers to Belgium when the army needed to pass through their territory and the offers to Russia and France which served the purpose of ending the two-front war. The second period was one of more general peace offers that were designed to end the conflict. The offer of December 1916 was driven by both the shortages and the costs of war and was a sincere attempt to bring an end to the immensely destructive war, despite it being the product of a fierce struggle with the opposition. The third and final period is characterised by the end to any realistic chance for a peace of understanding and the advent of the quasi-dictatorship under Ludendorff and Hindenburg, which resulted in more extreme war aims. This shift can be seen by the harsh terms of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, in which the Germans pushed for extensive territorial concessions from the Russians. The later treaty of Versailles followed this model, as both France and Britain demanded vast swaths of German territory and reparations for the costs that they had been burdened with through the war.

Driven by the failure to achieve a decisive military victory, the idea of a separate peace with one of the belligerents began to become an increasingly attractive option for the German state. The subsequent proposals that were created were specifically designed to relieve the strategic difficulties and help the German army to be able to win the war. Russia was the primary target of these negotiations for a separate peace, as the conclusion of a peace

agreement with Russia would enable the German to focus on a single front. The demands of these agreements were minor, as this increased the chances of the proposals being accepted. Even though these proposals still primarily served military goals the wide agreement among politicians and military commanders is still curious as the push for extensive demands in the East has historically been framed as one of the primary goals of the annexationist elements in the German empire. If there had been an agreement, the Germans would have forfeited any chance of annexing large swaths of land or creating nominally independent states that would be in the sphere of influence of Germany both politically and economically.

These separate peace offers did not get any serious consideration from the Russian government. There are two main reasons that these separate peace initiatives in the East completely failed. The first being the reliance of the Germans on hopeful assertions like the willingness of the Tsar and most of the Russian population to conclude a peace. These assertions turned out to be based on incorrect intelligence and were thus a major obstruction in concluding peace. The second reason was the fact that the Russians still had faith in the eventual victory, even after their defeats at the Masurian lakes and Tannenberg. This can be seen by the major offensives, like the Brusilov offensive, that were set in motion after these defeats.

With the improvement of the general position of the Central Powers in 1916, and the mounting internal political and economic pressure, the Germans took the risk of looking weak by offering the Entente powers a general peace offer. Especially since the peace overture was figured so prominently in all the major German newspapers and announced very publicly in a speech by the chancellor in front of the Reichstag. The offer was structured as an open invitation to talk terms and was devoid of any demands from the side of the Central Powers. The reason for this was that politicians like von Bethmann-Hollweg understood there were some delicate issues that could not be instantly solved like the issue surrounding Belgium and the province of Elzas-Lothringen. Leaving out these major friction points was thought to enhance the chances of the Entente powers coming to the table.

This subsequent rejection of the 1916 general peace offer was based on a combination of factors. Firstly, the Entente believed that the costs of fighting on for a final victory, which was likely in the eyes of Great Britain, France and even Russia, were lower than the costs of reaching an agreement. Secondly, the war was perceived in existential terms, which made any form of concession seem like a threat to the existence of the nation. Thirdly, the perceived challenge to the honour of Great Britain created a situation in the British parliament where most of the politicians were not interested at all in concluding a peace as this would tarnish

the British reputation as the world's hegemonic power. And finally, the flood of propaganda regarding the German state and people helped turn the hostilities of the countries into an ideological struggle.

Great Britain, France, and Russia (until March 1918) had, just like Germany, domestic pressure to end the conflict. This advocacy would however not be strong enough for these countries to either come with their own proposals or agree to terms of the German proposals. The reasons as to why these governments did not agree with or came up with their own peace initiatives are legion, but one tactic was especially potent in convincing the populace. This potent tactic consisted of the propagandic view of Germany as a militaristic, untrustworthy, and dangerous country, which was completely unlike the Entente powers. This framing would prove to be a strong tool for the Entente powers to motivate the populace to fight to the end instead of needing to make mutual concessions to conclude a peaceful resolution. The reason for this being that this propaganda framed the conclusion of a lasting peace with the Germans as impossible due to their distinct militarism and untrustworthiness. Apart from being able to convince many civilians in their own countries with this propaganda, the propaganda in combination with the repeated refusals to negotiate made the position of the advocates for peace increasingly difficult in Germany. The combination of these factors together with the rising power of the OHL, weakened the peace party in Germany significantly and produced a simultaneous strengthening and radicalisation of the advocates of more aggressive war aims.

After the repeated refusal of the Entente powers to engage in peace negotiations, the credibility of this path to ending the conflict decreased. Subsequently, the support for the '*Siegfrieden*' and its proponents increased. This shift contributed to the fall of von Bethmann-Hollweg and the organisation of foreign policy along the lines of the OHL. The OHL pushed hard for extensive demands, which were eventually realised after the Russians were forced to sign the treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This treaty forced the Russians to give up vast amounts of territory and to pay a sizeable sum as compensation. This was a significant change of course from the previous offers that had been made to Russia and was a sign that the annexationist elements had gained an upper hand in German foreign policy.

After the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Germans tried one more time to force a breakthrough, but due to the utter exhaustion and the shortages in the German army this offensive failed to deliver the final victory. After the collapse of this final offensive and the unrest on the Homefront the Germans were forced to sue for peace once more. This time however the German state would have no bargaining power and be forced to accept anything that was demanded. Just as the Germans had pushed for hard terms at Brest-Litovsk, the

French and British demanded severe concessions from the Germans. The treaty of Versailles would eventually lay the groundwork for the deep feeling of humiliation and the economic troubles that would contribute to the unstable post-war situation in Europe.

This research paper set out to outline three major arguments. Firstly, that the main German peace offers were sincere in trying to conclude a negotiated peace. Secondly, that there was significant support for peace initiatives both in the general populace and in the military and political elite, although it did vary greatly per initiative. And finally, that the war dragged on because the minimum terms of both sides were deemed unacceptable by the governments and populations which put significant pressure on governments. This view directly contradicts the long-held argumentation along the lines of the Fischer-these and its later iterations which state that the peace initiatives were mainly a ruse and that the sole goal of the German government was the domination of Europe through extensive annexations and creating a network of puppet states. Especially the 1916 general peace offer is a strong piece of evidence that there were significant elements surrounding Bethmann-Hollweg and the Kaiser in the German state that were ready to conclude a peace without these extensive demands. Furthermore, the plethora of enthusiastic newspaper articles in combination with the support of mass-parties like the SPD and Zentrum for some of the proposals indicate that at least some of these peace initiatives could count on significant support from the German population.

Future research needs to be done to dive deeper in the archives of France and Russia, as the limited amount of research that has been done has focused primarily on Germany and Great Britain. This research could provide valuable information into the reasoning and motivations of these nations for their decisions. Aforementioned will consequently improve the overall understanding of the Entente role in refusing the German peace initiatives in the First World. Furthermore, the research into why these peace negotiations failed could go on to lead to a better understanding of the historical failures to end wars.

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