



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Germany's Industrial Leaders on War Aims (1915)

Annexations were part of the Right's underlying assumptions about German victory. In the occupied territories to the West, the opportunities for exploitation were lavish, ranging from rich reserves in raw materials to modern plant capacity. Here, important representatives of German industry discuss the legal framework for protecting their gains after the war.

The following gentlemen took part in the conference on war aims of May 17 in the Chancellor's Palace in Berlin:

Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg
Under Secretary of State Wahnschaffe
Privy Financial Councilor [*Geheimer Finanzrat*] Hugenberg
District President [*Landrat*] Roetger
Corporation Lawyer [*Syndikus*] Hirsch
Baron [*Freiherr*] von Wangenheim
Dr. Roesicke
Commercial Councilor [*Kommerzienrat*] Friedrichs
Dr. Stresemann
Mayor Dr. Eberle
Mr. Wachhorst de Wente
Baron [*Freiherr*] von Twickel
Mr. Wallenborn

As the deputation's first speaker, *Baron von Wangenheim* noted that the associations that were represented at this conference demonstrate the unity of economic sectors that are usually antagonistic to one another. This unity has been achieved because the plight of the Fatherland has brought even former economic and political opponents together. After the Christian Farmers' Associations recently joined the corporations represented here, industry and agriculture stand united behind the demands that have been made by these corporations and are contained in the memorandum that has been presented to the Chancellor. Two factors have brought these groups together and are basic to their wishes. On the one hand, all sectors of industry have recognized the importance of agriculture to the economic and political existence of Germany. Without our agriculture to feed our people, this war simply could not be fought. The ideal of autarky is shared by all sectors. On the other hand, agriculture has recognized that German industry is likewise of paramount importance, that we would have collapsed militarily had German industry itself not been able to secure the extraordinarily large, direct and indirect requirements of the army with indigenous products. Strengthening and maintaining these two basic pillars of the German economy must therefore be the starting point for the Germany that we wish to construct after the war. From this premise, industry demands that Germany acquire

the large deposits of iron ore in France, that the ore basins of Longwy and Briey, as well as the coal fields in the Pas de Calais and in the Department du Nord, must in the future belong to Germany in order to damage the enemy economically and to make us independent. In the interest of striking a balance between industry and agriculture, it is also necessary to demand that we obtain new territory in the east – land for settlement – in which new farms could be created for German settlers and land could be provided as well to German workers who might arrive from Russia. These demands will initially bring about economic balance in the new Fatherland. Additional demands have been set down in the memorandum that has been presented. If at the moment heavy clouds are again appearing on the political horizon, and if one can expect that new enemies will join the old, let the Chancellor be convinced that the economic sectors that stand behind the associations represented here are ready and willing to persevere economically, and that they are fully convinced that perseverance will be possible, just as they entertain no doubts about our military success.

The demands posed here naturally depend on the military situation. If they cannot be achieved militarily, one will have to do without them. It appears more important to the associations represented here that a goal be set forth for the eventuality of victory – a goal that signals to statesmen what can be achieved if we are victorious. That would certainly have an effect on the army's morale.

After Privy Councilor Hugenburg spoke out along the same lines, emphasizing the standpoint of industry, Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg offered some extended remarks, which included the following: "He fully appreciates the significance of unity among the sectors of the German economy, which is expressed in the declaration presented to him. At the moment Germany faces a difficult political situation, which is in fact perhaps more difficult than at any time since the beginning of the war. We have to reckon with Italy's joining Germany's enemies; even the Balkan states of Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece may join them, too. He sees little hope that Italy in particular will remain neutral. Italy is presently ruled by the streets, although four-fifths of the senate is for Giolitti and peace. He [Bethmann Hollweg] has seen this development coming and for this reason believes that this is not an opportune moment to discuss war aims. He has no doubt that the German Empire will be able to protect its borders in the east and the west, even against this combined assault. The gentlemen can judge from the battles around Arras how difficult these defenses are to break. What will become of Austria-Hungary in this assault must remain an open question.

As far as war aims are concerned, the war has developed in a way that will make the idea of a peace of conciliation impossible. This is especially true of France's relationship to Germany. France has to be cured of its megalomania. It goes without saying that he is for capitalizing thoroughly on a German war to this end. It is deplorable and wretched to entertain the idea that we will not want to make the most of victory. He is painfully and deeply disturbed that anyone could attribute such a view to him, to which he has never given public expression. He is also of the opinion that restoring Belgium is impossible, for Belgium would only be a vassal to France and England. The situation in the east is different. A separate peace in the east is certain, if Italy does not enter the war. But even if Italy does become involved, the moment may arise in certain circumstances when Russia is no longer willing to continue the war, and we can as a result conclude a separate agreement with Russia. It is doubtful in any case whether such a separate agreement will make possible the fulfillment of the wishes that have been expressed. All in all, the present situation recalls Prussia's situation during the Seven-Years' War. The [present] war has taken on the character of a coalition war. He is no pessimist with respect to the war's outcome; he is filled with solemn optimism, but one cannot get around the fact that the situation has become difficult. Thus he does not know whether all the wishes expressed here are

realizable. He asks the participants to remain convinced that, when the proper time comes, he will call on the sectors represented here to stand by his side with advice and aid in resolving the question of Germany's future political and economic circumstances.”

During further discussion, Dr. Roesicke, Baron von Twickel, and Corporation Lawyer Hirsch spoke out. Dr. Roesicke noted in particular that it would be desirable to adapt or subordinate military operations to the goals in question, because the military could operate in a different way if it knew which areas were being targeted for occupation.

Corporation Lawyer Hirsch drew attention to a meeting between the National Liberal Party's board of directors and its executive committee. Despite the difficult diplomatic situation, complete unanimity emerged in the National Liberal Party on the question war aims, specifically on the same aims that were expressed in the petition from the economic associations. He thus welcomed the Chancellor's statement that it was deplorable and wretched for someone to think that a German victory should not be thoroughly exploited. He asked for permission to share the Chancellor's statement with the organizations that are represented here. There is unfortunately a great deal of mistrust in this respect, and not just among an insignificant sector of the people, but instead among the broadest and most able circles. He wishes especially to emphasize that the overwhelming majority of the German people stands behind the goals put forward here – with the exception of groups that are completely isolated.

During the remaining discussion, it was again pointed out that if Italy enters the war, a declaration is planned that would express the unity of the economic sectors that are represented here. The associations represented here are planning in particular to discuss all future questions of German politics with one another.

Source: Aufzeichnung des Mitglieds des Präsidiums des Bundes der Industriellen Gustav Stresemann über die Audienz einer Delegation der großen Wirtschaftsverbände bei Reichskanzler Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg am 17. Mai 1915 zur Kriegszielfrage [Notes by Industrial League Presidium Member Gustav Stresemann on the Audience of a Delegation of Large Economic Associations with Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg on May 17, 1915, on the Question of War Aims]. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes [Political Archive of the Foreign Office], Nachlaß Gustav Stresemann, Vol. 146.

Reprinted in Willibald Gutsche, *Herrschaftsmethoden des deutschen Imperialismus 1897/8 bis 1917* [*The Ruling Methods of German Imperialism, 1897/8 to 1917*]. East Berlin, 1977, pp. 222-25.

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering