



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918

Bernhard von Bülow Dissolves the Reichstag over the Colonial Issue (December 13, 1906)

Bernhard von Bülow (1849-1929) had governed Germany since 1900 with a coalition of conservatives, liberals, and Catholics. The Catholic Center Party, however, came to oppose the colonial policies that he and Kaiser Wilhelm pursued. Therefore, Bülow dissolved the Reichstag in 1906 and called new elections. The result was a coalition that briefly held a majority without the Catholics.

Gentlemen, at this late stage in the debate, I consider it my duty to point out, once again, the great responsibility that you assume with the current resolutions. The question is not whether a few million Marks more or fewer should be approved for our colonies. As the representative of the General Staff has persuasively argued, it is a question of whether we want to defend our colonies at all. As I might add as the executive director of imperial affairs, it is a question of whether we want to jeopardize our reputation abroad, our military honor (loud protests from the Social Democrats, a spirited “Bravo” from the right) – let me repeat, despite your objections: as I might add as the executive director of imperial affairs, it is a question of whether we want to jeopardize our military honor, our position in the world, our reputation, in order to save a relatively small sum of money at the end of a campaign that has us cost hundreds of millions (“Bravo!” from the right, protests from the Social Democrats). Do we want to risk the fruits of the gallant efforts we have been making for some years in a moment of weakness (disquiet among the Social Democrats). Will the sacrifices for our colonies, the great price we have paid in property and blood, will this be sufficient to bring victory to the colonies and the Fatherland, or will these sacrifices have been made in vain?

A government mustn't let parties and parliament dictate the number of troops it needs for military operations (protests from the left, “So true!” from the right). Gentlemen, where would it lead us if we grew accustomed to allowing party resolutions or party interests to dictate military measures in wartime – military measures whose proper execution is crucial for the life and health of our troops, for our military honor, and, in certain cases, even for the well-being and future of our entire country! (A loud “Bravo” from the right.)

Gentlemen, our soldiers are on the front lines, Germans who have fought, made an enormous effort, and are about to defeat the last resistance, the last remnants of the enemy – would you have them retreat now because of our cowardice, because a cowardly government wants to abandon them and disregard their valor for fear of parliamentary or party interests? (A loud “Bravo” from the right.)

Gentlemen, think of the colonial wars other nations have fought without batting an eyelash, the English, the French, the Dutch. Should the German people not stand as tall as the others?

Should they be more humble? It is this question to which the allied governments demand an answer, a clear and unequivocal answer ("So true!" from the right).

We may feel regret, Gentlemen, that a revolt has broken out that has cost us so many lives and such large amounts of money. We may feel regret about this, but we cannot go back. We must see this matter through!

Someone has put the words in my mouth: "Please, no domestic crisis!" I have denied saying these silly words, but I keep hearing them attributed to me. I have naturally said nothing of the sort ("Hear! Hear!" from the right). There are situations in which shrinking from a crisis shows a lack of courage and betrays one's sense of duty (a spirited "Bravo" from the right and the National Liberals). If you like: here is your crisis! ("Bravo!" from the right.) Parties can accept or reject demands since they assume no responsibility (Ooh!). They assume no responsibility! The government must not be swayed by the desires and interests of individual parties if its highest duty, its duty to the nation, is at stake ("Bravo!" from the right).

Just a few minutes ago, I was also informed of the rumor that, as far as this matter is concerned, I am not pushing, but being pushed – I am giving in to directives from the highest office. It is also being said that the guerilla war in Southwest Africa is a kind of military sport. Gentlemen, this is an impudent lie! No one is leading me; no one is urging me on. I don't need any directive to recognize that there is a national imperative here (loud applause from the right). I need no directive to proceed solely on this basis.

It is not at all a question of self-discipline. It is not a question of opposition between parliamentary and personal resolve. It is a question of the conviction of allied governments, which the Chancellor has adopted after conscientious deliberation. It is a question of our stature in colonial politics ("So true!" from the right and the National Liberals), and beyond this, of our international stature (protests from the Social Democrats). Gentlemen, do you believe that this will not have repercussions abroad? ("That's right!" from the right.) What kind of impression would it make, both at home and abroad, if the government were to capitulate in a situation like this, in a matter like this, and not find the strength to fulfill its duty to the nation (loud applause on the right and the left). We will do our duty – with trust in the German people! (Wild, lasting applause – hisses from the Social Democrats.)

Source: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstages* [*Stenographic Reports of Reichstag Proceedings*], X LP, 218: p. 4379.

Original German text also reprinted in Hans Fenske, ed., *Quellen zur deutschen Innenpolitik 1890-1914* [*Sources on German Domestic Politics 1890-1914*]. Darmstadt, 1991, pp. 203-04.

Translation: Adam Blauhut