



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

Bethmann Hollweg on the Consequences of the Russian Revolution (March 28, 1917)

The Russian Revolution in March of 1917 had an electrifying effect in Germany: it removed the Russian autocracy, the bogey that had persuaded the German Socialists to support the war in 1914. Also, the Russian experience furnished a model in practice of how economic issues, like bread shortages, could be exploited to bring democratic reform, and possibly an end to the war. Bethmann Hollweg (1856-1921) was keenly aware of this fact, as his note to an official in the foreign ministry makes clear.

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Efforts have already been made to influence the press along the lines ordered by His Majesty. I am paying all the more attention to this matter, because the Russian revolution naturally occupies the entire public intensely. The Social Democrats cannot be prevented from expressing their sympathy for the Russian revolutionaries; apart from the most radical wing, however, if my hopes are fulfilled, they can be prevented from comparing our situation with the Russian. The spread of antimonarchical tendencies does not seriously worry me for the time being. The position of the monarchy is strongly rooted in the broad masses of the people. A direct danger would, however, emerge if one were to label democratic demands, which are an unavoidable consequence of this war, simply as antimonarchical and if, as was common before the war, one were to recognize only the reactionaries as reliable pillars of the throne. Even military circles are going to have to convince themselves of this truth. A reactionary military dictatorship would lead us toward destruction. The course of events can make the satisfaction of democratic demands necessary during the war itself, in which case it is possible that the length of the war, the severity of sacrifice, and in the end developments in Russia, too, will make concessions appear insufficient that would have seemed adequate during the first year of the war. Without giving in to nervousness, one must be aware that a "too little" or "too late" can become fatal.

v. Bethmann Hollweg.

Source: "Telegramm des Reichskanzlers an Legationsrat Freiherr v. Grünau betr. die Rückwirkungen der russischen Revolution auf die Politik der 'Neuorientierung'" ["Telegram from the Reich Chancellor to Legation Councilor Baron von Grünau, concerning the Repercussions of the Russian Revolution on the 'New Orientation' Policy"], March 28, 1917, no. 100. – Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes Bonn [Political Archive of the Foreign Office, Bonn], Gr. Hauptquartier, vol. 245.

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