



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918 The Hindenburg Program (1916)

The Hindenburg Program called for the more efficient use of scarce resources for the war effort. Not only would the number of soldiers help determine the course of the war; the domestic economy's ability to produce sufficient weapons and other materials for the war effort was also of crucial importance. By 1916, however, the shortage of raw materials and labor had already proved debilitating. Many historians claim that the Hindenburg Program was unrealistic from the outset, and that it led the military leadership to blame the German defeat on the civilians who were responsible for economic production.

Over the course of the war, the influence of the machine has become ever more important; the significance of human power has by contrast diminished. The quality of troops, whose value can never be rated high enough, is no longer decisive; *instead*, superiority in artillery, munitions, and machine guns is increasingly decisive.

Factories and labor throughout the neutral world are available to our opponents. Germany and its allies are dependent on their own means alone.

The cultural superiority of the German soldier, his greater courage and higher sense of duty and honor cannot in themselves compensate for this superiority, all the more so because our enemies are also far superior to us demographically.

The situation is similar with the food supply. This question can also be of decisive importance for the outcome of the war, and in this area, too, our opponent has the richer sources of aid at his disposal.

Therefore, we can only win the war if we supply the army with enough military equipment that it confronts the enemy armies from a position of equal strength, and if we secure adequate food supplies for our entire population. Given that our enemies have richer resources, this goal is possible only if everything that our country has in natural resources, everything that industry and agriculture can produce, is utilized exclusively in prosecuting the war. *This maximum performance can, however, be achieved only if the German people in its entirety puts itself at the service of the Fatherland. All other considerations have to take a back seat to this effort; they can play no role in a struggle that is about the existence or non-existence of the state – about the independence, welfare, and future of our people.* After a victorious war, the peacetime economy will again blossom at home, whether we break with it now or not. After a lost war, however, holding onto peacetime conditions will have gained us nothing. We will be struck from the history of nations and condemned to complete economic dependence. [. . .]

I am thus convinced that it is essential for us to pass a *law*, in which compulsory service is extended to the entire male population between the ages of 16 and 60 and is applied to the entire war economy. We must find a clear solution and the direct path to our goal, lest the dimensions and significance of the whole question not be clear to the people.

Every man must be put into service according to his skills, be it at the lathe, in the office, or in any other occupation where he best serves the state. The regulations that implement this law will have to take this principle into account.

A *law* is necessary because the representatives of the people must share responsibility and because the population will submit to the new tasks with greater willingness if the Reichstag has participated. I am convinced that the parliament will not deny its consent to this law, that approval of the law will in fact develop into such an enormously powerful demonstration of our strength and willpower that it will make a deep impression on our enemies, and we shall move a good deal closer to peace.

In closing, I am obligated to emphasize that we must come to a quick decision and that time in no sense allows for long deliberations. Individual stipulations and the modalities of carrying out this law can therefore be determined once the task has been resolved in principle.

[signed] von Hindenburg

Source: Erich Ludendorff, ed., *Urkunden der Obersten Herresleitung über ihre Tätigkeit 1916/18* [*Records of the Supreme Army Command on its Activities, 1916/18*]. Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1920, p. 83 f.

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