



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Erich Ludendorff vs. Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (July 1917)

As chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (1856-1921) was generally a voice of moderation, particularly after Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1936) and Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937) replaced Erich von Falkenhayn at the Supreme Command of the Army in the summer of 1916. Bethmann Hollweg's hopes for Woodrow Wilson's mediation at the end of 1916 came to nothing, and, over the chancellor's objections, Hindenburg and Ludendorff forced the adoption of unrestricted submarine warfare in March 1917. Bethmann Hollweg remained in office until July, when the passage of the famous "Peace Resolution" forced his resignation and replacement by Georg Michaelis (1857-1936). Here, we see Ludendorff helping to force Bethmann's resignation by appealing to the Kaiser.

Central Army Headquarters, July 6-12, 1917

[. . .] On the morning of July 6, Erzberger, the busybody member of the Center Party's parliamentary faction, gave a speech in the Reichstag (Main Committee). He is to my mind a downright despicable product of partisan politics, but he has been raised to an important position not only by the most narrow-minded of his political friends, but also by the government itself. This speech could hardly be excelled in its cowardly retreat from all trace of energy to continue the war. He put forward a resolution in favor of a peace "without annexations, etc." News of the resolution immediately got to General Ludendorff. I was at this very moment presenting a report to Ludendorff when Lieutenant Colonel Bauer, who had himself been informed by a member of parliament, dashed into the room. "Now it is high time for the Chancellor to go," were his closing words.

In the train to Berlin, there were bright spirits over the prospect of the fight ahead. The plan for the campaign was set. The Chancellor must go, and General Ludendorff is going to give a brilliant speech in parliament, in which he "would expose the complete stupidity, in fact the criminality of this parliamentary cowardice." [. . .]

Things in Berlin, however, proceeded much differently than we had assumed. The [. . .] Kaiser went first to Bethmann Hollweg, informed himself there and then gave short shrift to both top generals as soon as they appeared, so we returned dejected to Kreuznach on the evening of July 7.

The Field Marshall was deeply upset. He naturally found the whole business outrageous, while Ludendorff's bitterness toward the Chancellor only grew.

We were thus ordered by the Kaiser to remain in Kreuznach. There the consternation remained great. There was no way things could stay like this. [. . .]

General Ludendorff played his last trump against the Chancellor. He asked to be relieved of his position and – Hindenburg joined him. Whether or not they were serious does not matter. It happened. The Kaiser received news of it by telephone from Kreuznach (July 12). Very angry, he summoned both generals but saw himself compelled by the force of Bethmann Hollweg's reasoning, to the effect that: "I cannot remain in power if the generals resign." [. . .]

Source: Hermann Mertz von Quirnheim, *Erinnerungen* [*Reminiscences*], reprinted in Wilhelm Deist, ed., *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914-1918* [*Military and Domestic Policy in the World War 1914-1918*], 2 volumes. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 791-92.

Also reprinted in Wolfdieter Bihl, ed., *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges* [*German Sources on the History of the First World War*]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, pp. 294-95.

Translation by Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering