

Civilian and Military Power (Germany)

By [Lukas Grawe](#)

Summary

Armed conflicts provide fertile ground for the military's ambitions to gain authority over civilian institutions and actors, a process that played out in the German Empire between 1914 and 1918. While military authorities and politics were almost on an equal footing when the First World War broke out, with the emperor as the constitutionally designated linchpin between the two spheres, Germany's military leadership gained more and more influence and power as the years passed, exploiting the growing power vacuum caused by the inactivity of Emperor Wilhelm II and thereby severely weakening the primacy of politics in both domestic and foreign policy.

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Introduction: The Constitutional Structure of Military and Politics

During the German Wars of Unification, Prussian Prime Minister [Otto von Bismarck \(1815-1898\)](#) and the Prussian military leadership were already engrossed in fierce, frequent discussions about the primacy of politics. Bismarck had always been able to assert himself, but despite his dominance, the power of politics in the [German Empire](#) was by no means consolidated in the office of the chancellor. The *Reich's* constitution of 1871, based on the federal structure of the [empire](#) and tailored to a strong chancellor like Bismarck, offered only

provisional security to the political system's supremacy. A significant dual role was assigned to the German emperor: as head of state, he held both the supreme political and military power.¹ According to the constitution, he was entitled to command the army in times of peace and war, making him "Supreme Warlord". Theoretically, neither the *Reichstag* nor the chancellor could influence his imperial prerogative. Additionally, due to his position as head of state, the emperor played an important role in the coordination of military and civilian authorities, since there was no superordinate national body such as a *Reichsverteidigungsrat* ("Committee of Imperial Defense").

The emperor did not have untrammelled power, however, and [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) was authorized to declare war only with the countersignature of the chancellor and the *Bundesrat*, although, importantly, not the *Reichstag*. Once this was done and the emperor had declared that the country was in a state of war, the Prussian Law of Siege (4 June 1851) came into force. From then on, the military commanders of the individual Corps Commands assumed executive powers and all local civil authorities were subject to their orders.

Before 1914, the German Empire did not have a supreme military authority to coordinate its numerous institutions. There was no imperial army due to the federal structure of the empire. Instead the German states of Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, and Württemberg had their own troop contingents and war ministries. The Imperial Navy, on the other hand, was the exclusive responsibility of the *Reich*, with the emperor as supreme commander, an admiralty and a state secretary of the navy. Thus, the military was not only divided into army and navy, but also into different decision centers. In the event of a war, the most important military officer was the chief of the Prussian General Staff. He was the first military advisor to the emperor and authorized to direct operations and issue orders in the name of the monarch. Thus, the chief of the General Staff was practically in control of the war command and his staff made up the [Supreme Army Command \("Oberste Heeresleitung", OHL\)](#) at the outbreak of war.²

Aside from the emperor, the chancellor was also responsible for enforcing the primacy of politics. He represented the imperial [government](#) and issued instructions to the state secretaries, who were subordinate to him. His political influence stretched across all policy fields, both domestic and foreign. The chancellor was appointed solely by the emperor; his term of office was in principle unlimited and independent of the composition of the *Reichstag*. In fact, however, the chancellor relied on the trust of the *Reichstag* to carry out his political ideas. The one area of state activity he could hardly influence was the German military.

The *Reichstag*, too, had no constitutional means of intervening directly in the emperor's military command, but its power over the state budget, including military expenses, provided

it with an effective means of exerting critical pressure. It was additionally responsible for any legislation pertaining to the armed forces. With the different branches of government aligned in this way, the events of the First World War quickly demonstrated the vulnerability of the primacy of the civilian political sphere in the German Empire.

Military and Politics at the Beginning of the War

Even before the First World War began, military and civilian authorities had trouble cooperating. The General Staff did not properly inform the civilian leadership of its own military strategies. Although chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) knew about the plan to march through neutral [Belgium](#), the Chief of the General Staff, [Helmuth von Moltke the Younger \(1848-1916\)](#), concealed the pending *coup de main* on Liège, which, when the [July Crisis](#) hit, had a devastating effect on the German government's capacity for political maneuvering.³ In addition, the General Staff did not even draw up a contingency plan to deploy soldiers other than westwards, further restricting the civilian leadership's scope for action. The chancellor and his advisors accepted the military's existing plan without objection, although the foreseeable political consequences of violating Belgian [neutrality](#) were severe. In this way, Bethmann Hollweg bowed to the supposed military necessities.

In the course of the July Crisis, Moltke repeatedly inserted himself into the political process, especially by writing the ultimatum addressed to Belgium. By right, this task should have been carried out by the chancellor or the Foreign Office, not a military official. The chief of the General Staff went even further. He encouraged his Austrian colleague [Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf \(1852-1925\)](#) to enter the war against [Russia](#), thus undermining Bethmann

Hollweg's efforts to keep the war in the Balkans.⁴ On 31 July 1914, Wilhelm II declared a state of war. As a result, the Prussian Law of Siege came into effect and executive powers passed to the territorial military commanders. Since the active Corps Commands transferred to the front, the Deputy Corps Commands assumed their function for the duration of the war. They not only took on the civilian authorities' executive duties, but also intervened in security, economic and social matters.⁵

On 4 August, the *Reichstag* unanimously approved [war loans](#) and passed war laws. This was a crucial decision because German politicians were not obliged to agree to the credits. If they had choked the military budget, the war would have been over before it began. During the early days of the conflict, the legislature took itself out of the picture completely, due to the self-imposed [Burgfrieden](#) (party truce), while the position of the executive branch – primarily the military – was strengthened enormously.⁶ Through the "Enabling Act", the *Reichstag* also transferred parts of its legislative rights to the *Bundesrat*, which was thus able to enact laws

without its consent.

The [General Headquarters](#) was formed, comprising of not only the General Staff, the emperor, and his entourage, but also the most important civil and military authorities of the empire. During the first phase of the war, civilian authorities stood back and were infrequently informed by the General Staff, which was now in charge of operations. The military quickly put a stop to what they perceived as premature ideas of peace. The expected quick victory against [France](#), however, failed to materialize. In mid-September, Moltke was replaced by [Erich von Falkenhayn \(1861-1922\)](#), who now held the offices of Chief of the General Staff and Prussian Minister of War.

Military and Politics 1914-1916

Focusing on the Eastern or the Western Front?

The German war plan, and with it any illusion of a short conflict, had to be abandoned on the [Marne](#). From then on, the *Reich's* leadership was forced to expect a tough struggle ahead, the end of which was not foreseeable. In light of the country's predicament, cooperation between the military and politics was even more important than it had been before. After only a few months of war, however, it became apparent that Wilhelm II was not fulfilling the role of mediator and coordinator which the constitution intended for him.⁷ This can be partly attributed to his lack of zeal and interest, but also to the information policy of his subordinates.⁸ However, with the help of the military cabinet and policies concerning military personnel, Wilhelm II was still able to influence some aspects of the country's military strategy. In addition, the navy was mostly his alone. Unlike everything pertaining to the army, which he delegated to the chief of the General Staff, the emperor himself was in charge of defining "his" fleet's strategy. After minor battles resulted in heavy [losses](#), Wilhelm II ordered the navy to remain passive throughout the further course of the conflict.⁹ Other than his involvement in [battles at sea](#), the monarch largely took a back seat and left military and political decisions to his subordinates.¹⁰

Falkenhayn had to obtain the emperor's approval on important military issues. Wilhelm II generally agreed with his chief of the General Staff's operational decisions and shielded him from his critics in the civilian leadership and the supreme commander of German troops on the [Eastern Front](#) ("[Ober Ost](#)"), namely [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) and [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#).¹¹ Through the emperor's protection, the army's leadership gained a great deal of autonomy. Attempts by Bethmann Hollweg to intervene in military matters were persistently and successfully rejected by Falkenhayn.¹² At the same time, he largely

recognized the primacy of politics in political matters and was anxious to adhere to the constitutional division of tasks.¹³

However, one pressing question could not be settled by compromises: should Germany concentrate its military efforts on the [Western](#) or Eastern Front? Following the failure of the original German war strategy and the beginning of trench warfare in the west, Falkenhayn and Bethmann Hollweg spent the winter of 1914/15 searching for ways to end the war victoriously. Although they both agreed that a war of exhaustion had to be avoided, they could not settle on a strategy to reach their common goal. While Falkenhayn was in favor of focusing on the Western Front and forging a separate peace with Russia, Bethmann Hollweg supported the two generals of Ober Ost, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who wanted to concentrate military efforts against the Tsarist Empire. In light of this stalemate, Falkenhayn turned to Wilhelm II to make a fundamental decision. Although the emperor avoided putting his foot down at first, Falkenhayn could ultimately rely on his support: the chief of the General Staff was authorized to concentrate the war effort on the Western Front and only provide the eastern troops with what was absolutely necessary. As a result of these tensions, coordination between the two opposing state institutions deteriorated further. Both Falkenhayn and Bethmann Hollweg considered their counterpart to have been miscast, increasing not only their personal differences, but also their differences in opinion. From then on, instead of working together, their departments merely coexisted.¹⁴

Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

One of the central issues in the conflict between military and civilian decision makers proved to be unrestricted [submarine warfare](#). Under question was whether German submarines should attack enemy and neutral merchant ships without warning, if they were in a defined zone around the British Isles, a move not in accordance with commonly accepted principles of so-called "prize law". There was reason to fear that the procedure, conceived as a German response to the [British naval blockade](#), would arouse the resistance of neutral states, above all the [USA](#). The issue sparked a dispute between German civilian and military leaders as to whether the ongoing unrestricted submarine war was a political or a military issue. While the naval leadership around the Chief of the Admiralty [Gustav Bachmann \(1860-1943\)](#) and State Secretary of the Navy [Alfred von Tirpitz \(1849-1930\)](#) was greatly in favor of using this confrontational strategy, Bethmann Hollweg and the Foreign Office rejected it. Both parties subsequently turned to Wilhelm II to convince him of their arguments.

At the end of February 1915, the German Navy began to torpedo merchant ships in the British sea without warning. On 7 May 1915, a German submarine sunk the British passenger ship [Lusitania](#). Numerous American citizens were among the victims, which prompted the

U.S. government to criticize the attack sharply. In view of the threatening diplomatic consequences, Falkenhayn supported the chancellor at first, and demanded the cessation of the unrestricted submarine war. The German Empire did suspend the procedure on 18 September 1915, while Bachmann was replaced by [Henning von Holtzendorff \(1853-1919\)](#).

At the end of 1915, however, the chief of the General Staff changed sides. He and the naval authorities considered the USA's entry into the war to be a calculated risk. On 5 January 1916, the army and navy agreed that the civilian leadership should have no say in the issue.¹⁵ From then on, armed merchant ships were sunk without warning. Bethmann Hollweg's assessment of the situation proved to be more realistic than that of the military authorities. Both the chancellor and the Foreign Office were certain that it would trigger the entry of the USA into the war and tip the scales in favor of the Entente. Wilhelm II once again had the final say in the matter. In April 1916, the emperor finally came to support Bethmann Hollweg's position. Tirpitz, who had manipulated the number of available submarines, had completely lost the monarch's confidence and was dismissed. This time, civilian politics had gained the upper hand on an important issue.

Supremacy of the Military 1916-1918

After [Romania's](#) entry into the war on the side of the Entente, Falkenhayn's position could no longer be sustained. Wilhelm II, his last remaining advocate, expressed his mistrust and replaced him with Hindenburg and Ludendorff on 29 August 1916, initiating a "political upheaval of the first order".¹⁶ In the following two years, this third OHL interfered in almost all realms of policy, domestic, foreign, and economic, and gained more and more authority. The [historiography](#) has spoken of this as "political hegemony",¹⁷ a "silent dictatorship"¹⁸ allowing the military authorities to "dictate in individual cases".¹⁹ Through his cooperation in the replacement of Falkenhayn, Bethmann Hollweg, the country's most powerful civil servant, had himself cleared the way for military supremacy.²⁰ Because of its popularity among the German people, the military enjoyed an almost plebiscitary position of power.²¹ Its aim was to mobilize all human and economic resources of the *Reich* to end the war with a so-called *Siegfrieden*, that is, an all-out military victory including annexations.

The Third OHL and its Interference in Domestic and Foreign Policy

Hindenburg and Ludendorff demanded to have a far greater say in domestic affairs than Falkenhayn, who had hardly interfered in this area of politics. It was, the new OHL argued, essential for the war effort that the German population fully support the army. With the creation of the so-called War Office, Hindenburg and Ludendorff could influence all of

Germany's economic affairs directly. At the end of October 1916, the office presented a bill, which, due to the resistance from the chancellor, introduced a work obligation for the male population between the ages of seventeen and sixty. The law and its implementation was the first serious disagreement between the new OHL and the chancellor. Hindenburg and Ludendorff were already thinking of disposing of Bethmann Hollweg, especially because the effects of the "Auxiliary Services Act", passed on 5 December 1916, had not been satisfactory. The act was ineffective not only because of the chancellor's objections but also, and mainly, because of the interventions of the *Reichstag* which strengthened the rights of workers.²² The behavior of the military was not yet dictatorial, but certainly authoritarian, gaining influence in more and more political fields.

On domestic issues in general, Hindenburg and Ludendorff stuck to a politically conservative course and turned against Bethmann Hollweg's reform line. They openly opposed a planned reform of the Prussian three-class franchise system and the democratic and parliamentary concessions that the chancellor had promised in his "program of internal reorientation". Wilhelm II on the other hand had shown himself to be more open-minded and had used his "Easter Message" of 1917 to announce reforms, which he nonetheless postponed until after the war. Besides positioning itself politically, the OHL was able to impose its convictions domestically by using the Law of Siege, which enabled it to impose far-reaching restrictions on personal freedoms. Thus Hindenburg and Ludendorff, with the help of their military commanders, influenced domestic [propaganda](#) and [censorship](#), ensuring public support for their goal of a *Siegfrieden*. The OHL also played a major role in suppressing strikes, an endeavor in which the OHL was dependent on the cooperation of the territorial military commanders.

Later in the war, criticisms directed at the military commanders' executive powers increased. Above all, resistance arose from the ranks of the *Reichstag*, which had hardly made a decisive statement since August 1914 and had as yet always approved the war loans it had been presented with. Starting in autumn 1916, all of the OHL's domestic policies met with disapproval from a majority of members in the *Reichstag*.²³ In April 1917, the [Social Democratic Party's](#) (SPD) members of parliament declared themselves in favor of a peace "without annexations and compensations" and received support from the Progressive and Centre parties. This parliamentary majority declared it would only approve future loans if a peace resolution was adopted which did not include any annexations. This stood in stark contrast to the ideas and hopes of the OHL.²⁴

The central issue of what the war should achieve touched on both domestic and foreign policy areas. The OHL had repeatedly advocated for large-scale annexations and ruled out

peace through negotiations. Meanwhile, during the entire duration of these discussions, Bethmann Hollweg did not succeed in asserting the political class' right to determining the goals of the war and Hindenburg and Ludendorff did not limit their interference into German foreign policy to this issue alone. Both of them had always been opposed to German diplomacy, which was considered "weak", and now intervened in the personnel decisions of the Foreign Office, thus affecting the chancellor's department. [Gottlieb von Jagow \(1863-1935\)](#), who had been secretary of state for many years, was pressured to vacate his position in favor of [Arthur Zimmermann \(1864-1940\)](#), from whom Ludendorff expected more cooperation.²⁵

The Proclamation of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

The issue of waging unrestricted submarine warfare also concerned the new OHL. As early as two days after assuming office, Hindenburg and Ludendorff met with the Admiralty and the civilian leadership to sound out the empire's options at [sea](#). Bethmann Hollweg made it clear that he was not a fundamental opponent of submarine warfare. To come to a decision, he felt "the Supreme Army Command's assessment of the military situation must be essential".²⁶ Remarkably, the chancellor had effectively abandoned the chance to express a civilian, political perspective and left Hindenburg and Ludendorff to decide.²⁷ The OHL now held a key position and supported the beginning of attacks on all ships on their way to and from [Great Britain](#). Hitherto, Bethmann Hollweg had always been able to convince Wilhelm II of his point of view, but he lost the monarch's support when the Central Power's peace offer of 1916 had failed. On 9 January 1917, a pivotal meeting between Bethmann Hollweg, Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and Holtzendorff took place. Both sides were reluctant to change their positions at first, but in the course of the meeting the chancellor was forced to consent. On 1 February 1917, the German Empire resumed its unrestricted submarine war. A short time later the USA broke off diplomatic relations. Bethmann Hollweg had lost his battle against the third OHL.²⁸

A few months later, on 12 July 1917, Hindenburg and Ludendorff threatened to resign if the emperor did not dismiss Bethmann Hollweg. In the *Reichstag*, resistance against the chancellor grew as well. He had alienated both conservatives and liberals with his centrist position. Wilhelm II now had to decide between his most popular generals and the chancellor, who was universally disliked. Bethmann Hollweg submitted his resignation on the same day, which was granted one day later. The principle of the primacy of civilian politics had thus been completely undermined. With his consent to Bethmann Hollweg's dismissal, the emperor had given in to Ludendorff's blackmail and renounced his constitutional right to select the imperial chancellor.²⁹ The OHL had not only overthrown the chancellor, but had

also succeeded in appointing [Georg Michaelis \(1857-1936\)](#), its desired weak candidate, to take Bethmann Hollweg's place. The emperor had surrendered an essential sovereign right.

Military and Politics at the End of the War

The looming failure of unrestricted submarine war had a negative effect on the third OHL's influence from autumn 1917 onwards. Hindenburg and Ludendorff had neither been involved in the *Reichstag's* peace resolution nor were they consulted in the appointment of [Georg von Hertling \(1843-1919\)](#) as chancellor on 1 November 1917.³⁰ The parliament now gained power: if it expressed its mistrust of a chancellor, the OHL, and even the emperor, could usually not keep him in office. The dismissal of Michaelis was the prime example of this shift in political power; parliament had forced a change of chancellor for the very first time in the history of the empire. Furthermore, the *Reichstag* now demanded to have a say in the selection of the chancellor and, in addition, became entitled to select state secretaries.³¹

Because of their popularity, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were still strong enough to influence foreign policy directives. This became evident in the peace negotiations with Russia. While Chancellor Hertling insisted that such talks were his responsibility, and State Secretary of Foreign Affairs [Richard von Kühlmann \(1873-1948\)](#) wanted to separate the Russian western provinces under the "cloak of the peoples' right to self-determination", Hindenburg and Ludendorff pursued a peace treaty that included large-scale annexations.³² Wilhelm II supported Hertling so that he could assert himself against the military in matters of territorial annexation. OHL still possessed its blackmailing power, a fact best illustrated by Kühlmann's forced dismissal. He had not only broken with the military line during the peace negotiations, but also had dared to publicly declare that the war could no longer be won by military means alone.³³

In the autumn of 1918, when the military defeat of the German *Reich* could no longer be averted, Ludendorff agreed to democratic and parliamentary reforms. In this way, U.S. President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), in particular, was to be encouraged to agree to mild conditions for an armistice. After Hertling's resignation, the OHL once again decided on the chancellor and appointed [Max von Baden \(1867-1929\)](#) to office. He asked Wilson for an armistice on 3 October, but – contrary to what Hindenburg and Ludendorff had expected – he was determined to restore the primacy of civilian politics. Moreover, the new government wanted to conduct the armistice negotiations itself. The chancellor had lost confidence in Ludendorff's military assessments. While at first the general had rashly demanded an armistice, after discouraging notes from Wilson, he considered prolonging the struggle. He also promoted a continuation of the unrestricted submarine war. On 20 October 1918, there

was a show-down: Wilhelm II stood behind the chancellor and ordered the termination of the submarine warfare. Ludendorff had finally lost his dominance over German foreign policy, while the OHL had to declare publicly that it did not consider itself a “political power factor”.³⁴

Ludendorff once again thwarted the government’s line, with the help of an “Announcement to all Troops” in which he encouraged the army to continue fighting. Baden now threatened to resign if Ludendorff remained in office. Wilhelm II also withdrew his confidence in Ludendorff. On 26 October, Wilhelm II approved Ludendorff’s resignation, while Hindenburg remained in office. From Baden’s point of view, the way was now clear for a Wilsonian peace, and the primacy of politics was restored. On the same day, the government decided to subordinate military power to civilian power in the newly adopted October Constitution.³⁵ But the [revolution](#) that began a few days later also ended the short lifespan of the October Constitution. Baden proclaimed the abdication of the emperor on 9 November 1918 and shortly afterwards [Philipp Scheidemann \(1865-1939\)](#) proclaimed the republic. The German Empire was consigned to history.

Conclusion

During the First World War, the primacy of politics was exposed to constant attacks by the German military leadership. Even before the war, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg had bowed to military constraints and had not opposed the violation of Belgian neutrality. The Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke intervened several times in the political sphere, especially during the July Crisis, thus exceeding his departmental boundaries. His successor, Erich von Falkenhayn, however, was eager to keep within these limits. He was able to ward off political interference in his military area, also because Wilhelm II supported him in all important decisions. The emperor, qua “Supreme Warlord” and coordinator of military and politics, completely failed in his function as a mediator and largely eliminated himself during the war. In this first phase of the conflict, Bethmann Hollweg was able to prevent unrestricted submarine war, which was vehemently demanded by the naval leadership and later also by Falkenhayn.

The accession of the third OHL under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, however, shifted the balance of power in favor of the military. Both generals intervened in almost all areas of domestic, foreign, and economic policy. Their influence finally reached so far that they were able to enforce not only the unrestricted submarine war against the resistance of Bethmann Hollweg, but also the dismissal of the chancellor. As the war went on, the *Reichstag* also gained power: for the first time in the history of the German Empire, it successfully asserted its voice regarding the staffing of the highest government offices. It was not until the end of the war when the civilian leadership succeeded in limiting the influence of the OHL. Only the

military defeats, which destroyed the nimbus of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, enabled the complete subordination of the German military to the primacy of politics.

Lukas Grawe, Universität Bremen

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