

Riezler, Kurt

By [Bernd Sösemann](#)

Riezler, *Kurt*

German politician, diplomat, journalist and philosopher

Born 11 February 1882 in Munich, Germany

Died 06 September 1955 in Munich, Germany

Riezler was a German politician, diplomat, journalist and philosopher, as well as a trusted assistant of the chancellor. Although some of his surviving diary entries dated from July and August 1914 as representative of the German Foreign Office's Press office were later rewritten, these entries together with his letters shed important light onto the intentions, decisions, and justification attempts of Germany's head of government.

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Overview of Riezler's Political Career

Kurt Riezler (1882-1955) was a German politician and diplomat, journalist and philosopher of history. His diary entries during the First World War as the personal assistant of Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (1856-1921) have surpassed any of his scholarly writings in terms of lasting importance. His diary and his personal correspondence with his fiancé Käthe Liebermann (1885-1952) – Max Liebermann's (1847-1935) daughter whom he married in 1915 – are particularly relevant for the summer of 1914. The original version of the diary entries on the so-called [July Crisis](#) did not survive and thus the authenticity of these passages is disputable from a critical source and editorial perspective. Yet even Riezler's later reworking of these entries, despite the poor editing, gives valuable insight into the mind of Bethmann Hollweg.

From Riezler's diary and correspondence the reader derives information about the intentions of the German leadership, the latter's justification for a "preventive war" (Bethmann Hollweg to Konrad Haußmann, 1919), memoranda on [war aims](#) ("September Program", [Mitteleuropa](#) under German hegemony), [war crimes](#) in [Belgium](#), as well as the extensive annexation wishes of the German military, politicians, and entrepreneurs:

The military [...] wants to annex half the world (letter from 24 August 1914); [...] it will be terrible after the war; the belief in violence that dominates so many people and the empty phrases that will be used (letter from 25 August 1914).^[1]

Kurt Riezler and his older brother Walther Riezler (1878-1965) were raised in a bourgeois Catholic family in Munich. He studied classical philology and completed his Ph.D. in history at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich. Before joining the Foreign Office in 1906 as temporary assistant ("*Hilfsreferent*"), he had travelled extensively across Europe, shortly worked at the

Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung and in the Imperial press office. In the following years, he took up posts in Paris, London, Stockholm, Moscow, Constantinople, and Shanghai. During this time his books *Prolegomena zu einer Theorie der Politik* and *Grundzüge der Weltpolitik in der Gegenwart* were published. In 1910 Riezler became a legation councilor and in April 1915 he was promoted to head legation councilor. During the July Crisis, he was a representative of the Foreign Office's press office (permanent assistant). In mid-October 1914, he moved to the Reich chancellery eventually becoming "Bethmann's favorite, personal secretary"^[2] and closest political advisor.

The July Crisis and the First World War

The Reich chancellor's policy in the summer of 1914 closely resembled that of Riezler's – his advisor on political warfare in the Reich Chancellery – favored concept before the war of a "bluff" strategy:

If a government, led astray by the bluff method, has ventured too far [...], then it is perhaps no longer capable of retreating even when this would be the reasonable thing to do – the consideration of personal interests, the ambitions of governments or the anticipated storm of indignation by the nationalists can bring about war, something that factual concerns alone could not justify.^[3]

In July of 1914, Bethmann Hollweg did not consider an alternative, but rather accepted the belligerent escalation of his course of action. "If the war doesn't come," Riezler noted in an entry on 8 July 1914 in his subsequently assembled notes, "if the Tsar does not want it or advises a distraught France for peace, then this gives us the chance to break up the Entente." In September 1914 Riezler drafted the "September Program." To his fiancé he wrote, the "staging [was] very good. Incidentally, the war was not wanted, but still calculated and it broke out at the most opportune moment."^[4] He explained to Theodor Wolff (1868-1943), "undoubtedly [Germany](#) played a risky game out of fear. [...] It is highly possible that because Russian willingness was underestimated, the game was thought to be less risky than it in fact was."^[5]

Riezler's view was that the German Reich should not only split the Entente [coalition](#) but also secure a geographical, economical, and financial base and source of [raw materials](#) through annexation and an indirect form of dependency. Only then would it be possible to establish a world power status that was difficult to contest. After August 1917, he returned to the Foreign Office and in October of that year worked at the Embassy in Stockholm as head of the Russia section. Following the [1917 Russian Revolution](#), Riezler negotiated a quick peace settlement and supported the [peace terms of Brest Litovsk](#) (3 March 1918). After the murder of Ambassador Wilhelm von Mirbach-Harff (1871-1918), Riezler became Counsellor of the embassy in Moscow with interim responsibility for overall management. Together with Mirbach's successor, Karl Helfferich (1872-1924), he pursued an anti-Bolshevist course of action. After the [USA](#) entered the war, Riezler no longer considered a *Siegfrieden* ("victory peace") possible, yet he only surrendered his idea of "German world hegemony" in early October 1918.

Riezler's career in the Weimar Republic and Exile

In 1919, he served as representative of the Reich to the Bavarian government and during the winter of 1919/1920 he was head of Reich President Friedrich Ebert's (1871-1925) office. After 1920, Riezler worked as a private scholar. In 1928, he became chair of the University of Frankfurt's board of trustees and an honorary professor of philosophy at the university. Vilified by the [Hitler-Papen-Hugenberg](#) government for having a Jewish wife, he lost his honorary professorship. In 1938, he and his wife immigrated to the United States where Riezler taught at the New School for Social Research. In 1954, he returned to Europe (Rome).

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Notes

1. ↑ Roth, Guenther and Röhl, John C.G. (eds.): Aus dem Großen Hauptquartier. Kurt Riezlers Briefe an Käthe Liebermann, 1914/1915 [-1918], Wiesbaden 2016. Original: “*Die Militairs [...] wollen die halbe Welt annektieren*” (Brief, 24.8.1914); “[...] *es wird schrecklich nach dem Kriege, bei dem Glauben an die Gewalt, der die Leute bei uns alle beherrscht und bei der hohlen Phrase, die dann aufkommen wird*” (Brief, 25.8.1914), pp. 126 and 129.
2. ↑ Sösemann, Bernd: Theodor Wolff. Tagebücher 1914-1919. 2 volumes, Boppard am Rhein 1984, entry on 24 May 1916.
3. ↑ Ruedorffer, J.J. (pseudonym): Grundzüge der Weltpolitik in der Gegenwart, Berlin 1914, p. 222. Original: “*Hat eine Regierung sich, durch die Methode des Bluffs verleitet, zu weit vorgewagt [...], so ist sie vielleicht nicht mehr imstande, einen Rückzug, auch wenn er sachlich richtig wäre, anzutreten – die Rücksicht auf persönliche Interessen, der Ehrgeiz der Regierungen oder der zu erwartende Entrüstungsturm der Nationalisten kann einen Krieg herbeiführen, den das sachliche Interesse allein nicht gerechtfertigt hätte.*”
4. ↑ Roth and Röhl, Hauptquartier 2016, p. 124 (letter from 22 August 1914).
5. ↑ Sösemann, Theodor Wolff Tagebücher 1984, vol. 2, p. 951, (letter from 21 March 1930).

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Citation

Sösemann, Bernd: Riezler, Kurt , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2016-06-23. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10923](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10923). Translated by: MacDougall, Carl

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