

# War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Germany)

By [Nils Löffelbein](#)

On 1 August 1914, the government of the German *Reich* declared war on Russia. Directly afterwards, an intense debate over its war aims flared up. This article traces the development of the war aims discussion: The nationalist War Aims Movement (*Kriegszielbewegung*) and the Supreme Military Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) pursued ever-more excessive war aims, which eventually led to the revocation of the prevailing truce (*Burgfrieden*) with the Social Democrats (SPD) and to the latter's eventual split in 1917. Russia's October Revolution represented the apex of the annexationist war aims, which was, however, followed shortly by the German defeat.

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## Introduction

The question of the German *Reich's* “real” war aims during the Great War has been brought up ever since the war itself. Especially in the course of the discussion on the question of responsibility for the War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Germany) - 1914-1918-Online

war (*Kriegsschuldfrage*), which vitally shaped the perception of the Great War during the decades between 1918 and the Fischer controversy in the 1960s,<sup>[1]</sup> it was considered as vitally important: Was the First World War the result of a systematic and conscious plan for conquest on the part of the German leadership from the very beginning, or did more defensive deliberations predominate, which merely anticipated an inevitable declaration of war by its enemies? This question has been controversial among historians for a long time and is mainly based on the confusing and often incomprehensible power relations and spheres of influence within the German supreme command, in which the military, the heads of [government](#), the parliament and, not least, the *kaiser*, Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859-1918) were fighting for political predominance.<sup>[2]</sup>

The following paper thus aims at showing that the German discussion of [war aims](#) during the First World War cannot be reduced to a fight between radical annexationists on the one hand, and proponents of peace on the other. It was, rather, a conflict between moderate and extreme positions calling for a “German peace” (*deutscher Frieden*), in which even the moderates did not categorically exclude territorial gains. Radical annexationists eventually dominated the public war aims discussion, however, while proponents of a negotiated peace were increasingly put on the defensive. During the second half of the war, the shift in power relations within the German *Reich* in favor of the [Supreme Military Command](#) paradoxically led to a gradual “totalizing” (*Totalisierung*) and dissolution of boundaries with regard to German war aims, even though the prospects for a German victory were becoming slimmer and slimmer after the Battle of the Marne.

## Early War Aims

Aiming at a purely defensive war in the beginning, the German command lacked a coherent agenda with regard to its war aims during the early days of the war.<sup>[3]</sup> Specific territorial targets had never been the decisive objective en route to war; initially, it seemed paramount to undermine Germany's enemies politically and economically in order to eliminate them from the race for European hegemony in the long run.<sup>[4]</sup> This means that long-term objectives were only formulated during the course of the war. At no point, however, was the belief abandoned that Germany had itself become the victim of aggression and encircling (*Einkreisung*).<sup>[5]</sup>

Still, a vast public debate over the war aims already developed during the first days of August 1914. Encouraged by early military successes, boundless plans for annexations were drafted, which were to become the main focus of public interest and to determine the opinion of large parts of the bourgeois middle classes. Calls for a victorious peace (*Siegfrieden*) and global dominance of the German *Reich*, territorial and economic expansion, as well as strategic and military protection (*Absicherung*) of the German borders enjoyed vast popularity far beyond the lines of the radical nationalist camp.<sup>[6]</sup> Earlier imperialist objectives in Africa<sup>[6]</sup> and the Near East now took a back seat to more general claims for the extension of power in Europe.<sup>[7]</sup>

Since the end of August 1914, the war aims debate was dominated by the annexationist War Aim Movement (*Kriegszielbewegung*), which included the extreme right, led by the [Pan-German League](#) (*Alldeutscher Verband*, ADV), as well as the large trade associations. They represented the opinions of a radical “*völkisch* nationalism”, with dissenting voices, who advocated more moderate positions in favor of a German defensive war without recourse to annexations, being in a clear minority from the beginning. After extensive war aims had been formulated in the course of the war fever that gripped large parts of the German public during the first weeks of August, Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg](#) (1856-1921) prohibited any further public discussion on the topic on behalf of the [neutral countries](#), as well as the German working classes, in order to prevent any further deterioration of seething internal conflicts.<sup>[8]</sup> In the beginning, the debate was thus held by means of numerous war aim pamphlets (*Kriegsziel-Denkschriften*), which were sent to the governmental agencies and the military by notable personalities, and outdid each other in their ever-more excessive objectives. Territorial claims in both eastern and western territories went hand-in-hand with calls for a large-scale expulsion of those regions’ established residents in order to settle them with German soldiers and farmers and thus exploit them economically. Similar demands were made by business leaders and politicians like Ruhr valley industrialist [August Thyssen](#) (1842-1926) and Center (*Zentrum*) politician [Matthias Erzberger](#) (1875-1921).<sup>[9]</sup>

## **Bethmann-Hollweg’s *Septemberprogramm***

Against the backdrop of growing tensions and the looming military breakdown of [France](#) at the height of the Battle of the Marne, Bethmann-Hollweg eventually composed an agenda of war aims that clearly reflected specific internal concerns. Current research thus often emphasizes that the so-called *Septemberprogramm* of 9 September 1914 does not constitute a coherent concept, but rather a loose array of demands attributed to various groups. All of them, however, advocated German hegemony on the continent and relied on a firm belief in a German victory.<sup>[10]</sup> One central idea pervading the program was the creation of a customs and trade association, which conformed to the demands of large-scale agrarians and due to which France in particular was to be made economically and politically dependent in the long run. [Belgium](#) was regarded as another centerpiece of the program and was to decline to a kind of vassal state and to be closely economically affiliated with the German *Reich*. Significantly, none of the politically responsible parties ever distanced themselves from the demand for the control of Belgium, just as they seemed unanimous with regard to a more or less direct subjection of [Poland](#). Other neighboring states like the [Netherlands](#), [Austria-Hungary](#), [Sweden](#) and [Norway](#) were to be affiliated in customs-related matters under the pretense of external equality (*äußerliche Gleichberechtigung*). The idea of a Central Europe under German hegemony as a bulwark against [Great Britain](#) was central to this program. Bethmann-Hollweg also added the concept of a coherent Central African Empire, which, however, was never specified in this context. The plans concerning [Russia](#) and other Eastern European states also remained conspicuously indeterminate, possibly because only a victory in the western parts of Europe seemed tangible at the time.<sup>[11]</sup>

## The War Aims Movement and the Pan-German League

Dominating large parts of Europe and becoming a global power was the main focus of the war aim program formulated by the radical nationalist Pan-German League and its president Heinrich Claß (1868-1953).<sup>[12]</sup> This group did not just call for extensive annexations in the east and the west, but also aimed at irrevocably securing the territories thus won through measures of nationalization (*völkische Maßnahmen*).<sup>[13]</sup> Even though the native population of [occupied Belgium](#) was not to be deported, it was to be used as an inferior workforce. The regions to be conceded by France were to be entirely depopulated and used as a special military zone (*Militärstreifen*).<sup>[14]</sup> The ADV's main objective, however, was the eastern expansion of the German *Reich*, which was to be used to satisfy the "German hunger for territories" through large-scale settlement measures to "make the East German". Preceding this settlement policy was a broad "ethnic separation" (*ethnische Entmischung*) of East Central Europe. These plans ultimately aimed at a gigantic resettlement and population exchange program, which paved the way for the "ethnic land consolidation" (*ethnische Flurbereinigung*) later sought by the National Socialists.<sup>[15]</sup>

The ADV exerted a decisive influence on the so-called "war aim majority" (*Kriegszielmehrheit*) within the German *Reichstag*, which also included representatives of the heavy industries, landowners, conservatives, liberals, as well as some Social Democrats. On 20 June 1915, the ADV and some other affiliated groups submitted a petition, called the *Intellektuelleneingabe*, which showed many leading trade associations and professors to be on their side. The memorandum of June 1915, which can be seen as the peak of the public war aim discussion, was signed by 1,347 persons of public interest. A counter-petition, signed by a group of intellectuals gathered around the Berlin-based historian Hans Delbrück (1848-1929) and demanding a peace settlement, did not attract as much support – though even it did not question the necessity for annexations in order to guarantee peace.<sup>[16]</sup>

## The Intensification of the Domestic War Aim Discussion

Up until the late fall of 1916, state [censorship](#) officials were required to prevent a public war aims discussion in order to preserve the prevailing societal truce (*Burgfrieden*).<sup>[17]</sup> On 18 November 1916, this ban was lifted by the supreme military command, because it expected to be able to influence public opinion better that way. The repeal of press censorship towards the end of 1916 marked the beginning of a rapid intensification in the war aim discussion, as well as a division within German society between proponents of a negotiated peace (*Verständigungsfrieden*) and a victorious peace (*Siegfrieden*).

As early as July 1916, the Independent Committee for a German Peace (*Unabhängiger Ausschuss für einen Deutschen Frieden*) was formed, which consisted mainly of the leading heads of the "war aim majority" (*Kriegszielmehrheit*) and whose [propaganda](#) measures were financed by representatives of the heavy industries. The increasingly dire war situation, however, did not lead to

more moderate war aims among the annexationist groups. On the contrary, it led to even more extensive territorial claims, in line with the proposed *Siegfrieden*.<sup>[18]</sup>

The leadership around Bethmann-Hollweg was not willing to counter the excessive agitation of the War Aim Movement for a long time. This, however, emphasized the growing contrast between the Chancellor and the Chief of Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn (1861-1922). As early as September 1914, the latter had demanded extensive clarification of the adverse military situation after the Battle of the Marne on behalf of the German public. This, however, was rejected by Bethmann-Hollweg and led to the remarkable situation which saw the highest-ranking military officer pushing for a more moderate conduct of war, while a civil politician insisted on the further perpetuation of the earlier war aims. Bethmann-Hollweg was under a lot of domestic pressure, however, and was thus forced to hide any weaknesses; the Pan-German League (*Alldeutscher Verband*) had already publicly called the Chancellor a slacker (*Flaumacher*) and considered his politics to be too feeble and soft.<sup>[19]</sup> Last but not least, Bethmann-Hollweg feared a slump in public opinion: He believed that a peace without a due reward (*Siegespreis*) would not be acceptable to the population after the sacrifices (*Blutopfer*) already made during the war. Indeed, internally, he had already started to move away from the *Septemberprogramm* and was pursuing far less extensive war aims behind closed doors.<sup>[20]</sup> In the face of domestic circumstances, however, the chancellor was forced to continue his ambivalent tactics in order to both appease the **Social Democrats (SPD)** in their demands for a defensive war and keep his promise for annexations in the western and eastern territories to the *Kriegszielmehrheit*.<sup>[21]</sup>

In the midst of an increasingly desperate war situation, the unstable truce slowly started to fall apart. The Social Democrats had invoked the right to national self-defense with their statement of 4 August 1914 and their agreement to take up further war loans, and at the same time, laid the sole responsibility for the beginning of the war on Russia. During the first half of the war, the government's position was still easily accepted by the majority. While annexations were officially precluded, the status quo was really only accepted in the west, and extensions of territories in the east were not out of the question. Beyond the surface of the party's demonstrative unity, resistance against the demands for radical annexations was spreading through the party base, as well as in parts of the SPD leadership, because they were increasingly perceived as contrary to the general demand for a defensive war. Out of the initially small opposition within the SPD *Reichstag* group which supported the governmental course of action, a new faction called the *Sozialdemokratische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* was founded in March 1916 when numerous delegates voted against new war loans at the height of the Battle of Verdun with its extremely high losses. In April 1917, the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland*, USPD) was founded, which called for a peace treaty without any demands for annexations and passionately appealed for an end to the human slaughter (*Menschenschlächtere*).<sup>[22]</sup> Even though the SPD, which had now changed its name to the Majority Social Democratic Party (*Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei*, MSPD), continued to grant further

war loans, it also pushed for peace as well as domestic reforms within the German *Reich*.

In July 1916, tensions were also rising between the military Chief of Staff Erich von Falkenhayn and General Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934) and his own chief of staff Erich von Ludendorff (1865-1937) because Falkenhayn did not believe that the German armed forces would be strong enough to defeat both Russia in the east and win the war in the west.<sup>[23]</sup> The failure at Verdun and further losses in the east eventually led to Falkenhayn's resignation in August 1916 and the rise of the military generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff.<sup>[24]</sup> Bethmann-Hollweg's hope for the reinforcement of a possible negotiated peace through the appointment of Hindenburg and Ludendorff proved a mistake, however, and the change of leadership actually turned out to strengthen the War Aim Movement.<sup>[25]</sup>

In the face of its futile military position, the government was eventually forced to submit a joint peace offer with Austria in November 1916, facilitated by the [United States](#). However, the conditions for this offer were so outrageous – Belgium was still to be under the political and economic influence of the German *Reich*, as were the French ore deposits in Longwy-Briey – that its rejection was predictable and even for the German government, it was only of tactical use.<sup>[26]</sup> On the one hand, it aimed at investigating the conditions for a negotiated peace and preparing the German public for disillusionment with regard to the eventual peace agreement. On the other hand, a rejection could also be used as a pretense to end the war through unrestricted [submarine warfare](#), which was then taken up with the highest praises by the German public in February 1917. This approach, however, turned out to become another catastrophic mistake for the Germans, since the United States' entry into the war had become inevitable, and with it, the German defeat.

## Conclusion: Military Objectives towards the End of the War

The unexpected collapse of tsarist Russia in early 1917 caused another fundamental change in the political situation and thus also in the war aims discussion. The cry for a “peace without annexations and contributions” propagated by the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies council spread like wildfire in all of Europe and put pressure on the Social Democrats as well, who had become increasingly alienated from their constituency due to their support of the governmental course of war. On 19 April, the SPD thus adopted a resolution in which they declared their solidarity with the Petrograd council and its demands. In May 1917, Philipp Scheidemann (1865-1939) threatened a revolutionary coup if the government did not give up its annexationist war aims and cease pursuing a war of conquest. This change in direction in fact amounted to a termination of the *Kriegszielmehrheit*. The so-called “Scheidemann peace” (*Scheidemannfrieden*) was hotly debated in public and led to frequent coarse insults directed at the SPD delegates by conservatives, nationalist liberals and *Zentrum* alike.<sup>[27]</sup> Nevertheless, the large *Reichstag* parties gradually started to come together during the course of the year and began to strive for domestic reforms and a speedy peace agreement. In his much-noted speech of 6 July 1916, the *Zentrum* politician Matthias Erzberger –

once a fervent supporter of a *Siegfrieden* – demanded a balancing peace. On Erzberger's initiative, the cross-party group *Interfraktioneller Ausschuss* was founded a few days later, consisting of the political left and the *Zentrum* party, in order to discuss the possibilities of a negotiated peace (*Verhandlungsfrieden*).<sup>[28]</sup> The extreme right, meanwhile, persisted on its radical course of war and founded the *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei*. With the foundation of the *Vaterlandspartei* by Alfred von Tirpitz (1849-1930), Wolfgang Kapp (1858-1922) and Alfred Hugenberg (1865-1951), the war aim discussion became even more racially and ideologically charged. The group was a rallying point for radical nationalists and increased greatly in membership until the end of the war. After the peace of Brest-Litovsk, its leaders demanded excessive territorial expansion in the east, while simultaneously pursuing war aims in Western Europe, characterized by anti-Semitic, anti-Britannic and anti-American rhetoric.<sup>[29]</sup>

The peace resolution of July 1917 was the first result of this new kind of agreement. It demanded a "peace through negotiation and a permanent reconciliation of the nations", which precluded "forcible territorial gains as well as political and economic or financial violations".<sup>[30]</sup> This, however, was opposed to the stance advocated by both the chancellor and the military supreme command, namely by Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who – notwithstanding their ever-sinking chances of winning the war – kept holding on to their annexationist war aims, as did the conservatives and the large industrial associations.<sup>[31]</sup>

The civilian leadership, and probably the Emperor himself, were willing, during the autumn of 1917, to contemplate a negotiated peace in the west on a status quo ante basis, even with some concessions on the *Reichsland*, and with a restoration of Belgium – all that at the expense of Russia. But this willingness was not put to the test, since French and British leaders refused to follow the leads suggested by Aristide Briand (1862-1932), Paul Painlevé (1863-1933) and Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, Marquess of Lansdowne (1845-1927) after various secret contacts with German and Austrian emissaries.<sup>[32]</sup>

With the October Revolution and the seizure of power by the extreme left in Russia, Germany's prospects suddenly seemed to be looking up again. Disqualifying the country as a factor of power in the war, Russia's withdrawal offered an advantage against the Entente and even made a quick ending of the war seem possible. The American president Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) took this as a point of departure in order to draw up the tenets for a European peace order on the basis of disarmament, free trade, the return of all occupied territories, as well as the preservation of the right to self-determination of all nations. Wilson's offer of peace did not, however, accord with the ideas of the German military leadership, which regarded the breakdown of the Russian multi-ethnic state as a new opportunity to further extend its territories in the east. This objective also determined the peace talks with Russia at Brest-Litovsk, which resulted in large parts of Russia falling into German hands.

The tremendous series of successes in the east inspired new hopes for a victorious peace in the west, and only the USPD refused to support the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Given the Russian

capitulation, German war aims reached completely new heights in 1918, including extensive plans for conquest and spheres of influence in Eastern and South Eastern Europe. As a consequence, German strategists developed the concept of a greater area ruled by Germany from the Bay of Biscay in France to the Ural Mountains. Thus, Ludendorff's dream of an empire in Eastern Europe came to replace the "Concept for Central Europe" (*Mitteleuropa-Konzept*) advocated earlier in the war.<sup>[33]</sup> This newly kindled anticipation of victory was to be brief, however. In August, the overwhelming superiority of the Allied troops became clear and the German defeat inevitable.

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