The pursuit of uncompromising war aims is, in the common understanding, one of the hallmarks of total war. To use Stig Förster's characterisation, total war is war “to the bitter end”, its object “the complete subjugation of the enemy”.¹ The passions aroused by mobilising populations for total war, so runs the argument, allow no room for compromise, negotiation, or diplomatic manoeuvre. Despite the ghastly price of achieving it, the unconditional surrender of one side or the other offers the only possible resolution. Although this is in many ways an apt description of the First World War, the proposition masks problems of great complexity. Two orders of calculation, strategic and political, bore on the issues of war aims and peace negotiations, and their interplay complicated understandings of both politics and strategy, as well as understandings of war aims and peace negotiations.

Understood in connection with the theatre-level deployment and commitment of armed force, strategic calculations were, almost by definition, paramount in the First World War. Military thinking in 1914 was governed in all the European armies by an “ideology of the offensive”. Founded on readings of Clausewitz by generations of his admirers, this doctrine held that warfare found its natural culmination in the decisive battle and that both strategy and tactics should be geared to offensive operations, which alone could bring victory in the great test of arms.² Compromise was foreign to these calculations. It could only mean the failure of the great strategic project. Again with appeals to Clausewitz, proponents of this view embraced a corresponding proposition about the relationship between strategy and politics, one that was itself hostile to the very idea of compromise. The two realms were, in this understanding, entirely independent of one another. The function of the statesman was to present the strategist with the political terrain on which the battle was to be fought, the roster of friends, foes, and neutrals, and the goals to be achieved. The statesman was then to withdraw from the field until informed by the generals that the battle was over. At this point, the statesman

returned in order to settle the political consequences. “Policy”, as the German emperor William II once noted, “is to remain silent in war until strategy permits it to speak once again”.3

Most civilian statesmen resisted their banishment in this fashion to the strategic periphery in wartime. The intersections between strategy and politics proved countless, as well as inherently contentious. Nonetheless, most statesmen were hostage to a political logic that was itself resistant to the principle of a compromise peace.4 Although a now extensive literature has enjoined caution and nuance in generalising about the “war enthusiasm” of 1914, one critical truth has survived.5 The war began as a moral bargain between state and society. Every belligerent country entered the war in 1914 with broad popular support. Systematically encouraged by governments, consensus reigned everywhere that this was a war to resist foreign aggression, and that national unity and resistance would be rewarded when it was over. The propaganda of the first months – the extravagant claims and atrocity stories that circulated on both sides – sealed the initial experiences of war in demonised images of the enemy. Intellectually and morally, these images organised understandings of the war’s terrible human costs, which began to register almost immediately. In these circumstances, compromise with the demons was unthinkable: it would have required an altogether different reading of the war, which could not have carried the same intellectual and emotional load. The origins of the war would have to be framed not in resistance to barbarism but instead in diplomatic miscalculation – the war as a dreadful mistake. No belligerent government could have survived this confession. Political leaders lacked “the courage to make peace”, as one of the German emperor’s advisors put it in 1916, “because they fear their own people”.6

Together the logic of both strategy and politics produced a scenario that corresponded in the main to the preferences of the generals. In questions of peace negotiations, diplomacy was shackled to the situation on the battlefield; and even if they wished to, statesmen were all but helpless to negotiate an end to the war until the military outcome was clear. Although there was no dearth of channels through which diplomatic communications – so-called “peace feelers” – could escape the tight confines imposed by coalition warfare, international negotiation was directed principally toward neutrals and allies.7

The same constraints operated on discussions of war aims. These revolved in every belligerent state around visions of victory, and they were formulated in the first instance with allies and domestic audiences in mind. No matter who sought to formulate them, whether soldiers or statesmen, war aims retained a contingent, ephemeral, conjectural character, since the strategic circumstances of the war’s end would dictate their practical relevance. For this reason, debates over war aims also militated against a compromise peace, as they tended to raise the stakes in an atmosphere in which the very suggestion of negotiation was thought to be a confession of weakness. A compromise peace would have had to square the circle. It required political agreement that each side had won a victory of some plausible kind over the other.

In all these respects, however, the complexity of the situation during the First World War was compounded by an additional circumstance. Strategy, politics, war aims, compromise, negotiation, victory, peace, and the relationships among them were fluid concepts all. They were objects of unremitting conflict, which intensified with the lengthening war in all the belligerent states.

In the hope of illustrating these dynamics in action, the following essay addresses several moments in the German history of the First World War. These represented the principal junctures at which the German leadership pondered the feasibility of a negotiated peace with more than the casual speculation that attended most discussions of this subject. “Negotiated peace” is understood here to be an end to the fighting prior to a clear strategic decision. For the sake of brevity, the essay focuses on the interaction of strategy and politics in German thinking about a negotiated peace. Hence, it considers only in passing Germany’s relations with its several allies, despite their central role in this thinking, and it pays but fleeting attention to strategic and political calculations in the enemy countries. It seeks to demonstrate, however, that in several different sets of circumstances, and for different reasons at several points in the war, the logic of strategy and the logic of politics posed, separately and in combination, insurmountable obstacles on the German side to a negotiated resolution of the war.

Although German strategic thinking in 1914 was also wedded to doctrines of the offensive, it was peculiar in several important political respects, at least if British, French, and Italian examples are taken as the norm. In Imperial Germany, both the civilian and the military leadership was responsible to the em-

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peror alone, not to the federal parliament, the Reichstag. This institution was itself nevertheless indispensable to the waging of war, insofar as its consent was required for the war bonds that provided the financial underpinning of the whole effort. In addition, the Reichstag deputies, who were elected by democratic male suffrage, collectively represented the most immediate institutional index of German popular sentiment. The vectors of wartime power in imperial Germany were thus more complex (not to say chaotic) than to the west. The national executive owed no institutional responsibility to the national legislature. Nor, aside from what the emperor provided, was there any institutional coordination between the civilian and military leadership, or between the service arms at either the ministerial or staff levels (or often even between army commands). The emperor’s temperamental inability to provide effective coordination of any kind had become clear before the war. As the war continued, it grew both more obvious and more grave in its consequences insofar as William II remained at least potentially, in Holger Afflerbach’s words, “an important, inescapable (unübergebbarer) power-factor” in any major strategic or political decision. The emperor’s failings blurred still further the already troubled distinctions between policy and strategy; and they encouraged the intrigue, institutional rivalries, ill will, and miscalculation that plagued both. To these difficulties the German constitution added another. Because the emperor was commander-in-chief, it stood to reason that military victory would redound to the credit of the constitutional system that he embodied. The converse was also true. Anxieties were rampant in both the civilian and military leadership that anything short of an unambiguous military triumph would breed calls for democratic reform, if not revolution, threatening not just the government, but the authoritarian constitutional order itself.

The possibility of a negotiated peace first surfaced late in 1914. The failure of the German offensive in the west signalled the collapse of the great strategic plan that General von Schlieffen had laid for a German military victory. In order to assess the implications of this perplexing turn of events, the country’s leading soldier and its leading civilian met on 18 November 1914. It was their first major consultation since the outbreak of war. Having just presided over the final fruitless German attempt to turn the Allied flank in Flanders, the head of the army’s supreme command (OHL), General Erich von Falkenhayn, announced to the federal chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, that Germany was not militarily powerful enough to achieve a “respectable (anständigen) peace” against a coa-

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lition of France, Britain, and Russia. From this confession of strategic failure, the general proceeded to demand that the chancellor find a diplomatic solution. The key, he insisted, was to be a separate, negotiated peace with Russia, which he believed Germany could not conquer in view of its vast spaces and manpower reserves. A lenient settlement with this antagonist would free German forces to concentrate in the western theatre; it might also, he reasoned, persuade France to make peace as well and leave Germany free to defeat Great Britain, which Falkenhayn, like many others, had identified as Germany’s most implacable enemy, the power “with which the plot against Germany stands and falls”. To this end, he suggested limiting military operations in the east in order to encourage the Russians into a negotiated settlement, in which the Germans would demand no more than an indemnity and, for strategic reasons, minor territorial adjustments.

Stunned by the general’s proposal, Bethmann Hollweg at first suspected a manoeuvre by the soldiers to blame the civilians for the failed military campaign (a suspicion that was, at this stage in the war, not so much wrong as premature). His own concerns were primarily political, for he was more attuned than Falkenhayn to the domestic circumstances of the war – the dramatic sense of home-front unity during the first hours, the high costs of the initial campaigns, and the popular expectations to which the sacrifice had given rise. His own understanding of a “respectable peace” had taken shape in this atmosphere, amid a cascade of petitions and manifestos that arrived in his office during the first weeks of the war from influential political groups. As the reward for sacrifices borne in the cause of victory, these documents laid out an extravagant vision of German hegemony on the continent, anchored by vast territorial annexations in eastern and western Europe, as well as in Africa. Whatever his personal sympathies in the summer of 1914 or his subsequent beliefs about the feasibility of this vision – and these remain a controversial topic – the chancellor was convinced in November that some dramatic political reward, a Siegespreis, was essential both for the future strategic security of the country and to compensate Germans for their wartime sacrifices. In both respects, he found Falkenhayn’s call for an immediate diplomatic compromise unacceptable.

This discussion represented a unique moment in the history of the war in Germany: the civilian was resisting the soldier’s demand for immediate peace negotiations, the soldier recommending not only a policy of diplomatic compromise, but also the terms of the political settlement. The statesman objected, however, not only to the policy, but also to its strategic premises. The paradoxes let loose in the process extended well beyond the clash of strategy and policy, military and civil-

ian authority;\(^{18}\) and the effort to negotiate the difficult boundary between strategic and military matters was now complicated by a personal animosity rooted in differences of temperament between the general, whose arrogance had earned him many enemies within the army and without, and the chancellor, a man whose ponderous circumspection struck many soldiers as a sign of weakness. Communication between the two men quickly broke down in the following weeks, as each concluded that the other was unfit for the office he held.

Strictly speaking, Falkenhayn had observed the constitutional proprieties, taking care, in his dealings with the chancellor, to justify his policy recommendations on strategic grounds. In reality, however, his recommendations served a broader strategic purpose, namely of redefining the war into something he thought the German Army could win. The difficulty was that his policy recommendations, and the strategic calculations on which they rested, met with disfavour in a number of important places, of which the chancellor’s office was only the first. In fact, Bethmann’s reaction to Falkenhayn’s call for peace negotiations represented the beginning of a tortuous struggle to devise a political resolution for the basic and abiding strategic dilemma that Falkenhayn had spelled out: the fact that Germany now found itself in a war that it could not win by military means. True, on the basis of Falkenhayn’s strategic assessment, Bethmann reluctantly accepted in principle the idea of a separate negotiated peace in the east, in part because he, too, hoped that it might split the entente. He resisted, however, the suggestion of immediate negotiations, lest the difficult strategic situation imply German military weakness and make winning an acceptable \textit{Siegespreis} unlikely. Instead, encouraged by officials in the Foreign Office, who were also worried about the morale of Austrian troops, Bethmann argued that additional military conquests by the Central Powers in Poland would provide the “leverage” (\textit{Faustpfänder}) necessary to strengthen the German position for subsequent negotiations with Russia.

These calculations governed the chancellor’s reaction to the unexpected Danish offer of mediation, which arrived in December 1914.\(^ {19}\) Bethmann did nothing to encourage serious negotiations. His response to the Danish overture was dilatory and unenthusiastic – a fact that he sought to hide from the more hopeful Falkenhayn. It quickly became clear, in any case, that the venture had no prospects of success. Not only was the Russian leadership under great pressure from its allies to remain in the war; it was no less reluctant than the German leadership to give the impression of negotiating from weakness. The circle could not be squared. Neither side was willing to concede enough.

The chancellor’s tepid response to the Danish offer also betrayed his basic misgivings about Falkenhayn’s strategic judgment. As these misgivings intensified, he


did not shrink from intruding into strategic affairs, showing fewer scruples than Falkenhayn about constitutional niceties.\textsuperscript{20} He turned for confirmation of his own, more favourable assessment of Germany’s strategic prospects to other army leaders, particularly in the camp of the so-called “easterners”, who rejected Falkenhayn’s strategic preference for the western theatre and lobbied for his removal as head of the army. The most important figures in this camp were the popular leaders of German forces in the east, the heroes of Tannenberg, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff.\textsuperscript{21} These men never made any secret of their disdain for Falkenhayn and his estimation of Germany’s strategic situation, and they insisted that with the proper support they could achieve a brilliant military triumph and win the war in the eastern theatre.\textsuperscript{22}

With Hindenburg’ approval and Bethmann’s support, Ludendorff now became the leading force in an elaborate cabal, which extended from the top ranks of the army to the emperor’s family and entourage. His goal was to replace Falkenhayn in the OHL with Hindenburg or somebody else. One remarkable feature of the campaign was Hindenburg’s threat to resign his command if Falkenhayn remained, for it was an act of insubordination toward the emperor, his commander-in-chief. Another was Bethmann’s personal intervention with the emperor on behalf of Ludendorff as Falkenhayn’s successor. This step, an incursion into the emperor’s authority of command, was at best an act of dubious constitutionality. At this stage in the war, however, the emperor invoked his powers as the constitutional superior of all the main players in the scheme. Because he and his advisors were comfortable with Falkenhayn, disliked Ludendorff, and feared Hindenburg as a potential Wallenstein, no change took place in the supreme command. A temporary truce was established among the conflicting civilian and military agencies on the uneasy basis of a commitment to \textit{Durchhalten}, or “holding out” both in the field and at home until something agreeable transpired strategically or politically.\textsuperscript{23}

Bethmann continued nevertheless to support Hindenburg and Ludendorff. He remained blind to Falkenhayn’s virtues – his respect for the constitutional limits of his own power and his sober realism about the strategic challenges of the war – and remained unconvinced that Falkenhayn’s prioritisation of the western front could produce the political results, the “respectable peace”, that he himself believed necessary to vindicate the war effort on the German home front. The extent of his own aspirations for a \textit{Siegespreis} he concealed in abstract allusions to Germany’s “self-assertion” or \textit{Selbstbehauptung}, although he hinted that this concept

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item He had already sought to intervene with the emperor in order to influence land operations in Flanders. See Janßen: Kanzler (see note 18), p. 39.
\item Afflerbach (ed.): Kaiser (see note 6), p. 21.
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\end{footnotesize}
embraced a certain “strengthening” (Stärkung) of the German position in Europe by means of “securities” and “guarantees”.24 At the same time, he calculated that installing the popular Hindenburg and Ludendorff into the OHL would make a compromise peace, whatever its terms, more politically palatable at home.

Bethmann persisted in this calculation despite a lot of evidence that it was perverse. Erich Ludendorff, the driving force in the eastern command, knew no hesitation or doubts about the possibility of military victory. In this respect he was more captive than Falkenhayn to the norms of German strategic culture, as embodied in Schlieffen with his vision of the Vernichtungsschlacht.25 Ludendorff was easy to describe as a Willensmensch, a soldier of brutal obstinacy and no scruples. His experience on the eastern front had only confirmed his instinctive view that strategic success was above all a question of resolve. He was not so much insensitive to potential conflicts between politics and strategy as he was a confirmed believer in the subordination of policy to strategic imperatives, if not in the identity of the two. “Germany must have secure borders and reliable neighbours”: his postulates were at once strategic and political.26 When, in 1916, Falkenhayn’s opponents finally achieved their goal and installed Hindenburg (together with Ludendorff) in the supreme command, a new political dynamic took hold in the German war effort, and it proved very much to Bethmann’s disadvantage. As the possibility of a negotiated settlement again became a central issue, the chancellor found Ludendorff’s shadow looming over every attempt to define the bases of a compromise peace.

The dispute between Bethmann and Falkenhayn at the turn of the year 1914/1915 had taken place largely out of public view. Although Falkenhayn’s enemies were in touch with several figures in the Reichstag, neither the political nor the strategic issues became the object of public debate. The practical consequences of the dispute, however, soon did. The emphasis in Falkenhayn’s strategic thinking remained fixed on the western front. Here he resolved to hold onto the territorial gains of 1914 and to wear down his opponents with a strategy of limited offensive operations, despite the conundrums inherent in this approach. Falkenhayn seemed wedded to the paradox that, as he explained in the autumn of 1914, “if we don’t lose the war, we will have won it”.27 Translating a strategy of attrition into a practical political scenario for the end of the war involved another paradox. It appeared to require a victorious peace – albeit a “moderate” one (gemäßigen Siegfrieden) – in the west, with military triumphs significant enough to persuade one or more of the country’s antagonists to make political concessions at the negotiating table.28 These could then be sold to the German public as

24 Winterhager: Mission (see note 19), pp. 533ff.
26 Nebelin: Ludendorff (see note 21), p. 381.
27 Cited: Afflerbach: Falkenhayn (see note 15), p. 198
28 Cited: Afflerbach (ed.): Kaiser (see note 6), p. 28.
a victory. The difficulty with this scenario, which invoked hopeful recollections of the Peace of Hubertusburg in 1763, was that the country’s antagonists were better able than the Germans to sustain a war of attrition.29 And by the summer of 1916 this point had become incontrovertible. Falkenhayn’s approach stumbled into a massive and misconceived offensive at Verdun, to which the Entente powers responded with their own massive and misconceived offensives at the Somme and in Galicia, in which they showed little sign of being worn down.30 So the war continued. The price of “holding out” on the German home front meanwhile became increasingly difficult to endure.31 Thanks in large part to the Allied blockade, but encouraged by home-grown bureaucratic disarray, shortages of food and other basic goods became the bane of everyday life in Germany, as well as the source of growing popular protest.

Bethmann Hollweg’s decision late in 1916 to make a formal offer of peace negotiations came in response to these pressures. It reflected his growing pessimism about Germany’s strategic predicament, and it played out in a broader political forum, which now included admirals as well as generals, the Reichstag, Germany’s allies, and the president of the United States. The debates that provided the context for the chancellor’s peace offer focussed on the German submarine fleet, whose ruthless deployment now seemed to promise more than relief from the dilemmas of attritional warfare; it portended the kind of decisive military victory that had eluded German forces in 1914.32 By mid-1916, after more than a year of controversy over the risks as well as the benefits of unrestricted submarine warfare, a showdown loomed in a renewed clash of strategy and politics. The arguments in favour of unleashing the submarines were formulated in the German Admiralty, reinforced by an imposing body of expert testimony, and pervasively popularised in order to mobilise public support. They rested on the (strategic) claim that unrestricted submarine warfare would drive Britain out of the war and render the Entente unable to continue fighting within a matter of months. The opposing arguments reflected scepticism about these extravagant strategic claims, but were ultimately political: unlimited submarine warfare against Allied commerce threatened to drive the neutrals, above all the United States, into the war on Britain’s side and to assure Germany’s eventual defeat.

As the issue was at once strategic and political, it was again difficult for the German leadership to resolve. Falkenhayn and Bethmann Hollweg had long quarrelled over it.33 The general contended that deploying submarines was purely a strategic decision, over which the admirals’ professional judgment could not be

29 Wallach: Dogma (see note 3), p. 301.
33 Afflerbach: Falkenhayn (see note 15), pp. 376–403; Janßen: Kanzler (see note 18), pp. 190–209.
impeached by civilian leaders with no constitutional authority in such matters; and Bethmann insisted that the civilian leadership bore the final responsibility for such a decision, whose political impact threatened to defeat its strategic purpose. In these circumstances, the chancellor concluded that the greatest hope of averting both a strategic and political disaster lay in the kind of compromise peace that he was now offering. As the pressure for unrestricted submarine warfare mounted from the army, the navy, the Reichstag, and the press, the chancellor struggled to find a diplomatic resolution.

His efforts were complicated by the change of army leadership in the late summer of 1916, in the wake of Romania’s entry into the war on the Entente’s side. Once Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over the OHL, a decision about the submarine could not be postponed much longer. Bethmann originally welcomed the change in the supreme command, calculating that the new leaders would be more open than Falkenhayn to his own political reasoning and that they would provide cover for the diplomatic offensive that he was now planning (although he failed to share his hopes with the two soldiers in question). He proposed to publish an offer of peace negotiations, possibly with American mediation, in the hope that the overture would split the Entente, bring an end to the war with France or Russia, and result in German territorial gains that, however “lean” (mager), would prove politically acceptable in Germany because they would enjoy the endorsement of the two new army leaders. In this scenario the popular generals were to provide Bethmann with, as Karl-Heinz Janßen put it, his “alibi with the German people”. Even if the negotiations did not get this far, a German offer to negotiate in good faith might, Bethmann reasoned, serve as a tactical device to win sympathy in America for Germany’s plight and reduce the risk of war with the U.S. over the submarines.

As became evident in tangled negotiations during the fall of 1916, Bethmann was worse than wrong in his assumptions. His tactics conceded a central role to the two army leaders – both as arbiters in the strategic debate over submarine warfare and as political godfathers to any negotiated peace. In one of their roles, Hindenburg and Ludendorff agreed to postpone a decision about the submarines until the campaign against Romania was over. In their other role, they arrogated to themselves the power to define the bases on which Germany would offer to negotiate. As he sought to define the terms of his peace offer, hence the minimum

36 Janßen: Wechsel (see note 34), p. 345.
goals to be achieved, Bethmann Hollweg was reminded of the perils of discussing war aims in the absence of a strategic resolution of the conflict. His own ambitions had evidently retreated. He was by now in fact coming to adopt a definition of a victorious outcome much like that of Falkenhayn in late 1914: “If we survive against this coalition of superior strength (Übermacht) and emerge able to negotiate credibly”, he confided in late October 1916, “we will have won.”

Even on the subject of Belgium, whose retention had become a central symbolic marker of a victorious peace in Germany, his ideas constituted, as Professor Ritter has written, “a programme of extreme moderation” (although they did not envisage the complete restoration of the status quo ante).39

The chancellor was hardly in a position, however, to make the peace offer independently. “No one can imagine the enormous difficulties in which every action is entangled”, wrote his confidant, Kurt Riezler, as Bethmann worked on his proposals. “Agreement must be achieved with the OHL and our allies, the federal states informed, the ministries filled in, the party leaders [and] the press managed – to say nothing of the emperor.”40 The complications quickly multiplied. When Bethmann consulted the other Central Powers, in whose name the offer was also to be extended, he received a catalogue of ambitious war aims, which stood not a chance of acceptance by the Entente as bases for negotiation.42 When he sought the views of the army’s supreme command about the strategic dimensions of a German negotiating position, he was robbed of all his illusions about the generals whose ascent he had recently abetted. Hindenburg and Ludendorff laid before him their own long list of demands for indemnities and annexations in the east and west. This document radiated Ludendorff’s understanding of secure borders and reliable neighbours, as well as his disdain for Bethmann’s diplomatic project, whose best outcome would be, he believed, to fail and thus to provide a pretext for unrestricted submarine warfare. That a peace offer was nonetheless published in December 1916 was a testimony to Bethmann’s persistence and negotiating skills; but it arrived stillborn and shorn of any specific demands. Lest it be construed as a confession of German weakness, the supreme command insisted that its public announcement be swaddled in allusions to Germany’s military strength and that it contain a scarcely veiled threat of unrestricted submarine warfare should the overture be rejected. For good measure, on the prompting of the supreme command, the emperor then contributed a widely reported, blustering speech to the same effect. As a consequence, Bethmann’s peace offer invited the conclusion abroad that Germany had already won the war.43

The complications that beset even inter-allied negotiations on war aims spoke volumes about the obstacles to a compromise peace in this war; and the difficul-

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39 Ibid., p. 336.
40 Ibid., p. 335.
43 Birnbaum: Peace Moves (see note 37), p. 249.
ties that stood in the way of agreements with the enemy were even more formidable.

Whatever the degree of Bethmann’s moderation, no language – short of an offer of military surrender – would have persuaded the Entente to accept either the overture from the Central Powers in December 1916 or Woodrow Wilson’s offer to mediate, which arrived in Europe several days later. The collapse of Bethmann’s diplomatic plan removed the last barriers to unrestricted submarine warfare. In the face of another extravagant memorandum from the Admiralty, in which the virtues of the strategy were allowed to swamp the political perils, even the chancellor dropped his opposition to the step. The formal decision came in early January 1917, in a meeting at which the emperor presided. This meeting represented a unique instance of institutional coherence in the German war effort, the sole occasion on which a major decision emerged after consultations, however perfunctory, among all the agencies concerned, political as well as military. But correct procedures were no guarantee of sensible decisions; and this one was a fateful leap in the dark. It pandered to desperate hopes, which were grounded in the same popular stereotype of a “nation of shopkeepers” that had underpinned the image of Great Britain as Germany’s most dangerous and devious foe. The decision also reflected, not for the last time, Ludendorff’s profound ignorance of the United States, which he regarded as a less serious strategic threat than Holland or Denmark. In fact, for him the decision for war with the U.S. held no qualms, if only because a compromise peace was nowhere in his intellectual repertoire, as his actions confirmed several months later.

The collapse of the German peace offer of December 1916 hastened the dramatic realignment of power that had begun in Berlin with the appointment of the new OHL. The decision to let loose the submarine, a weapon that had by the beginning of 1917 assumed the aura of a Wunderwaffe, was greeted with widespread jubilation in Germany. Popular commitment to the vigorous prosecution of the war was now embodied in the supreme command, particularly in the figure of Hindenburg, who had become, thanks in part to his astute cultivation of his own image, the symbol supreme of a victorious peace. The power of the new supreme command thus had a popular, acclamatory basis. It differed fundamentally from Falkenhayn’s, which had rested entirely on support within the emperor’s inner circle. In so far as a majority in the Reichstag continued to vote in favour of the war bonds, the chancellor could claim a degree of tacit popular support, but his power, too, ultimately rested on the confidence of the emperor. Bethmann was thus more vulnerable in the new political landscape. So was the emperor himself,

44 Deist: Strategy (see note 12), p. 277.
who had, in Riezler’s judgment, “fled into the shadow of the two soldiers – and swims meekly in their wake”.\(^{48}\) William II’s own credibility was now hostage to threats of resignation from the heroes in the supreme command. Given this new dynamic, an intensifying public debate over how to end the war drove sentiment toward two institutional poles, the army’s supreme command and the Reichstag, each of which could lay claim to some sort of popular mandate. The issue was more complex than the institutional polarisation of strategy and politics, however, for the positions of both the OHL and the Reichstag entailed far-reaching strategic as well as political implications.

From the moment it was appointed, the new OHL enjoyed secure authority over strategic decision-making, for it faced none of the dissent and intrigue within the officer corps that had plagued Falkenhayn. Under the aegis of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, the logic of strategy also shed the subtle ambiguities that had stalked Falkenhayn’s thinking about how to end the war. The new commanders were resolved to win it by means of a decisive military victory, although, paradoxically, they adopted their predecessor’s belief that the great battle would take place in the western theatre. Less paradoxically – and less subtly – they embraced the political logic that had guided Bethmann’s thinking. The sacrifices borne by the German people demanded a *Siegespreis*. As a reminder of this fact and in hopes of raising morale in the army as well as on the home front, the OHL pressed the political leadership in the fall of 1916 to remove all restrictions on public discussion of German war aims. Like the decision to force the wholesale regimentation of the German economy in anticipation of a great strategic offensive, and like the decision to launch unrestricted submarine warfare, this move showed how far the army leaders’ all-embracing view of strategy now intruded into politics.\(^{49}\)

It is tempting, in view of these developments, to speak of a military dictatorship in Germany after 1916.\(^{50}\) To do so, however, would be to underestimate the institutional constraints placed on the OHL, particularly by the Reichstag, which now emerged as a significant voice in the issue of war aims and peace. Here the increasing strains of war had found expression in growing restiveness, as well as in sympathy within the left-wing parties for the idea of a negotiated peace. Thanks in no small part to decisions by the supreme command, events in the first half of 1917 not only intensified the unrest in the Reichstag, but also brought the question of peace negotiations directly within its purview. Predictably, the decision to launch unrestricted submarine warfare drew the United States into the war in early April 1917, only weeks after revolution in Russia had brought down the tsarist autocracy. Both events dramatically altered the ideological terrain of the war, turning imperial Germany suddenly into the most autocratic party in the conflict; and they

\(^{48}\) Riezler: Tagebücher (see note 41), p. 383.


had a marked impact on the German debate about a compromise peace. President Wilson's calls for a “peace without victory” and a “world safe for democracy” resonated in appeals from the new Russian republic for a “peace without annexations or indemnities on the basis of the self-determination of peoples.” The messages from America and Russia seemed to point towards a compromise peace; and by linking such a peace to democratic reform they emphasised that the future constitutional order in Germany would be determined by the outcome of the war.

Nowhere was this nexus more a goad to action than in the German Social Democratic party, the largest in the Reichstag. This party spoke for the poor, the social groups that were most vulnerable to the material burdens of the lengthening war. It was already the leading parliamentary proponent of a compromise peace when the events of the spring of 1917, particularly the revolution in Russia, altered the political stakes. For one thing, to the Socialists the fall of the Russian autocracy represented a great victory, fulfilling their central war aim and resolving the principal issue that had persuaded the party to support the war in 1914. For another, events in Russia threatened to fan revolutionary opposition to the war within the labour movement in Germany, the Social Democratic party’s primary constituency. The formation of a radical anti-war party, the Independent Social Democratic party in April 1917, raised the alarm. All these pressures lent new urgency to demands for a compromise peace, and they created a potential solvent for the political and strategic obstacles to negotiation. The key lay in the definition of an alternative Siegespreis, to be obtained from a negotiated end to the war: the reward for the sacrifices of the German people was now not to be territorial aggrandisement but democratic reform of the German constitution instead – the establishment of ministerial responsibility to the Reichstag, as well as suffrage reform in Prussia and the other German states.

Prospects for this kind of peace carried a high price, however, namely the end of the national consensus in favour of war, which had been struck in 1914. The heated debates over war aims, which had intensified since late 1916, made this truth all too evident. Both within the Reichstag and without, loud and articulate sentiment on the Right insisted on holding out for a much grander Siegespreis, the great territorial annexations that would accompany a German military triumph. The similarities to the thinking of the OHL were not coincidental; they corresponded to the material and moral support that the army provided to the advocates of this expansionist vision. Such were the lines along which political opinion polarised in Germany between Right and Left, between the proponents of a decisive “Hindenburg Peace” and the supporters of a negotiated “Scheidemann Peace” (named after the Social Democrats’ parliamentary leader). At issue now were

conflicting definitions of victory, which meant conflicting visions of peace, as well as conflicting visions of domestic politics, for the Right insisted that military victory would vindicate the authoritarian institutions that the Left proposed to reform.

In the middle stood Bethmann Hollweg. The logic of the chancellor’s own thinking about a negotiated peace entailed, as he himself recognised, concessions of some kind to domestic reform. So did his effort to preserve the support of the Social Democrats for the war bonds. But making constitutional reform, in addition to a negotiated peace, politically acceptable put all his powers of compromise, obfuscation, and intrigue to their greatest test. His tactic again featured an effort to compose intractable issues into ambiguity. In this case, contradictory assurances to the leaders of the Left and Right accompanied a series of vague public promises of domestic change. These culminated in the so-called Easter Message (Osterbotschaft) of 1917, a proclamation from the emperor that spoke of reforming the Prussian suffrage, but only after the war. Such gestures satisfied neither the Left nor the Right, so the domestic debate over peace and domestic reform smoldered on until it erupted in early July, in a parliamentary attack on the strategic direction of the war.

The uproar was occasioned by the leader of the Catholic Centre Party, Matthias Erzberger, who in a sensational speech to a parliamentary committee, declared that the German submarine campaign against Allied shipping had failed, that this strategy had been based on faulty reasoning from the start, and that, to make matters worse, the country’s Austrian ally was on the verge of collapse. A majority in the Reichstag, which extended from the Social Democrats on the left to the Centre Party, thereupon voted to respond formally, on its own authority, to the Russian and American declarations about a negotiated end to the war. “The Reichstag”, read the resulting resolution, “strives for a peace of understanding and the permanent reconciliation of the peoples. With such a peace, forced acquisitions of territory and political, economic, or financial oppression are inconsistent.”  

This action, a defiant challenge to both the chancellor and the OHL, turned the Reichstag into the public proponent of a negotiated peace in Germany. But it also left no doubt where power ultimately resided. In the eyes of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who had long regarded Bethmann as little more than the manager of opinion in the Reichstag, the peace resolution represented his terminal failure in this capacity. The resolution itself they condemned on strategic grounds, as detrimental to “the offensive and defensive capability of the army.” Before it could even come to a vote, they provoked a showdown. They threatened to resign if Bethmann remained in office. The bewildered emperor, whom Bethmann had coaxed remarkably far towards making political concessions to the Reichstag, had no choice but to accept his chancellor’s resignation and to appoint as his successor a little known bureaucrat, Georg Michaelis, whose principal qualification for office was his respect for

54 Mayer: Wilson (see note 52), p. 133.
the strategic and political views of the soldiers. This much he made clear in his initial appearance before the Reichstag, when he pledged to support “your” resolution “as I understand it”, noting that his understanding excluded any peace that did not “guarantee the security of Germany’s borders for all time”.

The implications of Michaelis’ appointment for the prospects of diplomatic compromise quickly became evident at the next stage in the unhappy history of peace negotiations during the First World War: the Papal Peace Note of 1 August 1917. This overture to the belligerent powers, which proposed the renunciation of German claims on Belgium as the basis for peace negotiations, has inspired a long controversy in Germany and a small mountain of literature, largely because a committee of the Reichstag was peripherally involved in formulating the German response. In truth, this controversy has been beside the point. Quite apart from the resistance that it encountered generally among the belligerent powers, the Pope’s overture foundered on the political realities in Germany, including the reluctance of Michaelis and Richard von Kühlmann, the foreign minister, to renounce German claims for fear of the domestic political consequences. Those members of the Reichstag who wished to pursue the Pope’s overture had no power to do so. The OHL, which did have the power to do so, had no thought whatsoever of renouncing Belgium. “We would be completely secure”, replied Ludendorff when asked for his views on the strategic aspects of the problem, “only if we occupied all of Belgium militarily and stood on the Flemish coast”. Ludendorff’s logic, whether one called it strategic or political, was a barrier around which no proposal for peace negotiations could manoeuvre. The principal role of Michaelis and the foreign minister was to persuade the Reichstag not to challenge this truth.

The same truth crippled the peace feelers that the two sides continued to put out during the rest of the year. It also governed the unsettled political situation in Germany during the last year of the war, as the polarisation intensified around the questions of peace and constitutional reform. Large organisations, the German Fatherland Party and the People’s League for Freedom and Fatherland, sought to mobilise popular support for the various Siegespreise that were now associated respectively with the names of Hindenburg and Scheidemann. Their


58 Steglich (ed.): Friedensappell (see note 57), p. 537.


activity revealed how war-weariness was now affecting the debate over war aims. The advocates of the Ludendorff Peace faced the charge that they were *Kriegsverlängerer*, warmongers whose extravagant demands were prolonging the war in their own political interests (which included the advantages afforded them by systems of class-based suffrage), while the advocates of compromise peace (and democracy) could offer an earlier end to the war. The whole debate merely confirmed the fact, however, that constitutional reform was in principle no different from any other war aim. Like Belgium, Poland, or the iron fields of Briey-Longuy, its future awaited the strategic outcome of the war. This had been Ludendorff’s premise all along; and in the end, he was right.

The German quest for a compromise peace had a coda, in which Ludendorff himself played a bizarre role. For a brief moment in the spring of 1918 it appeared that the general’s ferocious resistance to a compromise peace would be vindicated – and this with the support of the Reichstag. Late in 1917 his armies won the war in the east. The ensuing negotiations at Brest-Litovsk resulted in a draconian treaty that not only documented Ludendorff’s understanding of a compromise peace. The ratification of the treaty by a majority in the Reichstag also threw a revealing light on this institution’s understanding of the same concept.

Ludendorff thereupon set out in the spring of 1918 to win the war in the west. The initial success of the great German offensives in France, towards which his strategic and political thinking had been oriented since the summer of 1916, raised prospects that the war would end in a magnificent German military triumph and a peace that would, like Brest-Litovsk, reward the most ambitious visions of a *Siegespreis*. By July, however, with the Allied counteroffensives, the collapse of these hopes became undeniable. It remains uncertain when Ludendorff admitted the failure to himself. He had nothing but contempt for the political offensive that the civilian leadership began to signal in June. After the middle of July, however, as strategic setbacks mounted along with indications that the morale of the German armies was eroding, his erratic actions and statements, like his hectic search for scapegoats, suggested the limits of his own confidence. At the end of September, pressed by his own advisers, he abruptly confessed the bad news to Hindenburg and the civilian leadership, calling for “an immediate armistice to prevent a catastrophe” and, to facilitate this escape from strategic crisis, the reform of the German government “on a broader basis”.

Ludendorff’s demand recalled Falkenhayn’s challenge to Bethmann Hollweg in November 1914. Once again the soldier confessed strategic failure and told the statesmen to enter peace negotiations – though now much more in the transparent hope of deflecting responsibility for military defeat onto the civilians. Like Falkenhayn, Ludendorff also called for a diplomatic compromise with the enemy. To this end, he offered, as “an enormous military concession”, the orderly evacu-
ation of the territories occupied by the German army in the west. Then, in the expectation that the route to negotiations would be easier via the Americans, he endorsed the idea of approaching President Wilson, whose Fourteen Points, read superficially, seemed to promise a less vindictive settlement, albeit one negotiated by a democratic German government.

Here the parallels with 1914 ended. This time the strategic catastrophe was no longer latent. Ludendorff’s own subsequent efforts to argue otherwise only betokened his own increasing flight into fantasies. His admission of defeat at the end of September found a responsive audience among the civilian politicians, who, after brief consternation occasioned by the abrupt character of the news, could harbour few illusions about either the strategic or political implications.

With his confession, Ludendorff set in motion forces over which he quickly lost control, although his behaviour in this final crisis revealed habits of thought that had been impossible to break. The very language he used to describe the armistice he was seeking, “an offer of peace and armistice” (Friedens- und Waffenstillstandsangebot), reflected the thoroughgoing conflation of political and strategic categories in his mind, as well, perhaps, as his continuing retreat into his own illusions. He seemed in fact to have regarded the offer primarily as a strategic manoeuvre, a move toward a cease-fire that would be protracted enough to allow the German armies to regroup for further action. As the ongoing negotiations with Wilson revealed the futility of this expectation, Ludendorff invoked strategic considerations in an attempt to block the political consequences of his own actions. Wilson’s third note, which arrived in late October, prompted him to sign – without consulting the civilian government – a general order that dismissed Wilson’s terms as unacceptable, “an exhortation (Aufforderung) to us soldiers to continue resisting with all our powers”.

By this stage, however, the politicians no longer heeded him. Unlike Falkenhayn in 1914, Ludendorff could not survive the terrible confession of strategic failure, for it destroyed the basis of his own political power, which in the end had rested on the promise of military victory. The emperor could no longer save him, because, thanks largely to Ludendorff, he himself was impotent. Nor could Hindenburg save him, as long as he himself hoped that his nimbus would somehow survive the catastrophe for which he shared responsibility with Ludendorff. The dynamics were different in 1914 and 1918 in one other, fundamental respect. For the first and only time during the war, the strategic and political imperatives were now aligned in favour of a settlement. The civilian statesmen and the generals who mattered now agreed on the urgency of negotiations. The difficulty was that Ger-

63 Ibid.
65 Ritter: Staatskunst (see note 4), here: vol. 4, p. 416.
66 Ibid., p. 446.
67 Pyta: Hindenburg (see note 21), pp. 350f.
many was no longer in a position to “negotiate” for peace. The strategic decision had been reached. Germany had lost.

“Germany risks losing the war strategically with Falkenhayn and losing it politically with Ludendorff.” 68 Whatever its general accuracy as a verdict on Germany’s military leadership during the First World War, this remark, which Bethmann Hollweg is reported to have made in the summer of 1916, well captured the gist of the chancellor’s complaints about the two soldiers with whom he had to work in search of a negotiated peace. The same remark also threw light on the great obstacles – the difficulties of securing a consensus of political and military judgment – that prevented this outcome, for such a consensus was the indispensable prerequisite for any diplomatic compromise that might have had the remotest chance of success. The struggles between the civilian and military leadership were testimony as well to the immense problems that attended top-level decision-making in Germany, where institutional disarray compounded the contested conceptual ambiguities of strategy and politics.

Several points in this story deserve emphasis at the end. Although the soldiers erected high barriers to peace negotiations, they were not the only ones to do so. The civilians’ political objections to ending the war without a conclusive military verdict were decisive early in the war; and they remained formidable throughout, even as war-weariness mounted and political pressures for a compromise peace gathered in the Reichstag. As this institutional development also made clear, decisions about peace negotiations were never the monopoly of a small group of civilian or military leaders. Thinking in the army leadership about strategy was deeply embedded in military institutions and traditions. The anxieties of the civilian leadership about the domestic political consequences of a negotiated peace were neither narrowly held nor illusory, as the bitter public debates over war aims and then the events in the autumn of 1918 demonstrated. It is arguable that the real illusion was the very prospect of a negotiated end to the First World War. It does not suffice simply to describe the resistance to such an outcome in Germany. The strategic and political obstacles were insurmountable everywhere.
