

CHAPTER SEVEN

ORGANIZING FOR VICTORY

LUDENDORFF TAKES CHARGE IN GERMANY

Although Hindenburg and Ludendorff were given supreme command with a mandate to win the war, Ludendorff saw they would have to change the very nature of the war in order to win it. With German troops under heavy pressure both at Verdun and the Somme, attacking in the west was out of the question. Gradually, Ludendorff reverted to a defensive footing. He organized defences in depth, leaving the main line up to a mile or two behind battalion outposts. At its zenith a year later, the elastic defence featured three to four zones. The first zone was held lightly by interlocking outposts that acted as shock absorbers. The main battle zone was the trench system proper, while the rearward zone or zones served as a launching area for counter-attacks or a backstop if the enemy penetrated the main battle zone. The strategic equivalent of this came when Germany began the construction of an immense defensive line stretching south from the Somme area south-west to Soissons, where the Front turned east toward Verdun. This *Siegfried Stellung*, known in English as the Hindenburg Line, was more than a line or wall. Up to ten miles deep in places, it featured immense belts of heavy wire, machine-gun posts and concrete pillboxes. It was a main battle zone with an attitude. Behind it, the entire German nation was mobilized under the Hindenburg Programme, a war economy under military direction.

Ludendorff realized that going over to the defensive in the west might buy time but it would not bring victory. Unlimited submarine warfare was the only answer. When Ludendorff first took over, he supported the cautious approach, and for the next few months, sorting out the mess left by Verdun kept him from meddling in political matters. Then in September 1916, he forced the government to declare the creation of an independent Kingdom of Poland. Because the new state was carved out of Russian Poland, this declaration effectively destroyed any chances for a negotiated peace with Russia, which Ludendorff thought impossible in any case. Defence in the west meant attack in the east, his personal field of glory since 1914, and he wanted Polish aid.

UNLIMITED SUBMARINE WARFARE

The issue that brought the dispute over war aims into the open was the submarine. Those who favoured a moderate negotiated peace sided with Bethmann Hollweg, while the majority, who demanded sweeping annexations that would require a total victory, sided with the navy. When Tirpitz resigned in March 1916 after the submarines were restricted again, he led the creation of the Fatherland Party. It spread the message that only the ruthless use of the submarine would bring total victory and only total victory was worth considering. This upsurge in annexationism and war-fever mobilized radical pressure groups such as the Pan Germans outside the *Reichstag* and brought together a militant annexationist majority inside.

In October 1916, the *Reichstag* adopted a resolution presented by the Catholic Centre Party stating that the chancellor must bow to the expert military judgement of the High Command in deciding how to use submarines. The Centre Party moved towards support for total war because it had become convinced that a two-front war could not be won on land. Bethmann Hollweg also began to wonder whether his opposition to unlimited submarine warfare was wise. If unrestricted submarine warfare really would bring Britain to her knees in six months, how could he refuse to exploit the one weapon that could save Germany? America might come into the war as he had always argued, but how would she reach Europe if the submarine stood in the way? Faced outside with a growing alliance of politicians and generals, beset in his own mind by doubts about the virtues of caution, Bethmann Hollweg began to hedge. However, he resolved not to give way to his enemies until he had had one last try at ending the war diplomatically.

OFFERING PEACE

Bethmann Hollweg was not the only leader who tried to negotiate in 1916–17. In Britain, a former Foreign Secretary and die-hard conservative, Lord Lansdowne, circulated a letter to the Cabinet in November 1916 calling for a negotiated peace. He made his appeal public a year later in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*; *The Times* would not publish it. These peace feelers were not simply a product of war weariness. In late 1916, most people were still optimistic about the war, even those in uniform. War weariness did not come until 1917. Instead, the peace feelers served the double purpose of stopping the war before it became total if they succeeded, and of justifying total war if they failed. What doomed this last chance of negotiating peace before war became total were not the motives involved but the necessary ambivalence of even suggesting negotiations in the midst of war.

One rule of thumb in understanding coalitions in wartime is that allies usually end up distrusting each other. That being so, the first side to call for negotiations might be trying to weaken the other coalition by offering terms

that favour one of the enemies, thus encouraging the contempt that familiarity breeds. If the favoured enemy expresses interest, the others will feel ill-used. The peacemaker might be appealing to enemy public opinion over the head of enemy governments. Or the peacemaker might be genuinely sick of war and interested in peace. The other side has to evaluate the motives behind the peace offer before responding. Peace was one more illusion that had to be exposed before the disenchanting reality of total war could be seen in all its horror.

As Bethmann Hollweg contemplated what to do about the submarine, he had one eye on the Social Democrats. A radical and pacifist section had split away from the SPD the previous March, and its contention that the government was waging an imperialist war of aggression was gaining credence among the working class. Bethmann Hollweg's other concern was Washington, where, in November 1916, Woodrow Wilson had been re-elected as the man who had kept America out of the war. Bethmann Hollweg knew that Wilson's commitment to neutrality was more than a trick to win votes. By November, British arrogance annoyed Washington more than German behaviour, because the British had started to seize American mail on neutral ships and to blacklist companies doing business with Germany. Moreover, the British treatment of Ireland since the Easter Rebellion in Dublin in 1916 had incensed Irish-Americans. Bethmann Hollweg knew that Wilson was preparing to offer himself as a mediator. If Germany could beat Wilson to the punch and announce the terms on which she would consider negotiations, then both the Social Democrats and the Americans would be appeased. If the Allies accepted these terms, then the gains Germany had made so far in the war would be consolidated in a peace treaty. If the enemy refused to concede a peace favouring Germany, the onus for prolonging the war would rest with them and the German conscience would be clear. On 12 December, Bethmann Hollweg declared that Germany and Austria-Hungary were ready to begin immediate peace negotiations for terms that would ensure their existence, honour and freedom.

Bethmann Hollweg's 'peace offer' coincided with Wilson's appeal to all the warring nations to state their war aims clearly. In the end, Britain and France rejected the German peace offer out of hand and managed to deflect Wilson's attempt to insert himself as a mediator. How this was done shows the ambiguities of the situation and the virtual impossibility of stopping the war diplomatically. All these threads crossed in London, where Lloyd George had just replaced Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916.

LLOYD GEORGE KNOCKS OUT PEACE

David Lloyd George rose to power as the champion of a total war effort to deliver 'the knock-out blow'. When the German peace offer arrived just after he had replaced Asquith as Prime Minister, his concern over the weakness of Russia and the carnage on the Western Front inclined him to take the offer

seriously. This was reinforced when Wilson's appeal to state terms arrived, because Britain could not afford to alienate Wilson by appearing to be inflexible. Lloyd George wanted to avoid creating the impression that he had slammed the door to a negotiated peace.

When Lloyd George addressed parliament, he began by saying that France and Russia, the main victims of German aggression, had already replied to Bethmann Hollweg. He was simply going to support what they had said. He weighed war and peace, arguing that it would be a crime to prolong the war for no good reason but just as wrong to give up a righteous struggle simply out of weariness or despair. He had to respect the American wish that Germany be invited to state her terms and the French reluctance to state any terms at all. He solved the puzzle by arguing that, while he would listen to any useful terms Germany might offer, he was convinced that the fact of Prussian aggression ensured that worthwhile terms would not arise in the first place. Any German concessions would be worthless because they would be German, coming from the nation that had already violated pledges and treaties in 1914. In the end, he squared the circle, finding a way to pledge Britain to a fight to final victory without offending America.

Once the option of negotiation was discarded, Germany and Britain were locked into a fight to the finish. There was no longer room between them for American neutrality. On the final day of 1916, Ludendorff decided to cash the blank cheque the *Reichstag* had given him and demand unlimited submarine warfare. At a Crown Council on 9 January, Bethmann Hollweg accepted defeat and agreed to unleash the submarines. The last straw for him had been the cold reception his peace offer had received in London.

Not knowing of the German decision, Wilson still believed there was a chance to be the honest broker for peace. On 26 January, the British accepted his mediation. Wilson then learned that Germany was adopting unlimited submarine warfare. He immediately broke off diplomatic relations. In March, the British intercepted and carefully circulated a bizarre telegram from the German Foreign Secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, to the German ambassador in Mexico. Zimmermann offered an alliance to Mexico and the return of parts of Texas and New Mexico if she declared war on America. When the telegram was published, Zimmermann blithely admitted sending it. German submarines compounded the offense by sinking seven American merchant ships. Wilson felt he had no choice but to summon Congress and, on 6 April, to declare war on the Central Powers. The war was not only total now; it was finally a world war.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONS

Just when there seemed no way out but straight ahead, the Russian people opened a door. In March 1917 women queuing for flour rioted in Petrograd (St. Petersburg). When the authorities used the army to put down the

demonstrations, the soldiers joined the angry crowds. With no support left, the Tsar abdicated. The *Duma* or parliament chose a provisional government under Prince Lvov. The new government tried to interest France and Britain in peace, but when they replied that the arrival of democracy in Russia improved the chances of victory, Russia stuck to its promises and stayed in the war. At first patriotism balanced war weariness evenly, but when the Russian offensive in June turned into a shambles, the loyalty of the provisional government to its allies was its undoing. The Socialist lawyer Alexander Kerensky took over the government, but the Bolshevik Vladimir Lenin, spirited from Switzerland into Russia via a sealed train thanks to the Germans, out-manoeuvred him easily. In November 1917, Lenin's unqualified hostility to the provisional government and exploitation of the issues of 'land, bread and peace' enabled him to seize power from Kerensky.

THE FALL OF BETHMANN HOLLWEG: JULY 1917

Lenin's sealed train would prove to be an unsafe container for 'the bacillus of revolution'. When word of the Tsar's abdication reached Germany, Bethmann Hollweg persuaded the Kaiser to mention political reform in passing in his Easter message. The dormant *Reichstag* stirred into life, and the parties in the centre-left majority formed an inter-party committee to consider reform. The dynamic Centre (Catholic) Party leader, Matthias Erzberger, had private information showing the failure of the submarine campaign. When he spoke in the *Reichstag* in favour of a negotiated peace, the left-wing parties included peace along with reform in their agenda and passed a Peace Resolution, the only such resolution put forward by any legislature during the war [Doc. 3]. Ludendorff argued that Bethmann Hollweg had lost control of the situation and forced the Kaiser to replace him with a nonentity, Georg Michaelis, who promptly gutted the Peace Resolution. Count Hertling later replaced Michaelis; he was almost as spineless, as was his vice-chancellor, the veteran Progressive Friedrich von Payer. With Russia about to drop out of the war and victory again in sight, the mood of the patriotic classes swung back to a peace of victory, just as the working classes moved towards peace and revolution.