Manufactured Necessity: Organized Pressure, Command Autonomy, and the Erosion of Civilian Authority in Germany's Submarine Decision, 1915–1917

ABDENNOUR GHERINA[1], MALIKA KELLIL[2], MOHAMMED MAHDADI[3]

[1]Lecturer "A", Abbes Laghrour University of Khenchela, Algeria
Email ID:-abdennour.gherina@univ-khenchela.dz
[2]Lecturer "A", Abbes Laghrour University of Khenchela, Algeria
Email ID:-malika.kellil@univ-khenchela.dz
[3]Lecturer "A", Ghardaia University, Algeria
Email ID:-Mahdadi.mohammed@univ-ghardaia.edu.dz

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ABSTRACT

This article asks why Germany's leadership adopted unrestricted submarine warfare in January 1917, despite foreseeing that it would likely bring the United States into the war. It argues that the decision reflected an internal struggle for power rather than neutral military calculation. Civilian authority proved structurally unable to resist the autonomy of the military command (Kommandogewalt). An alliance of military leaders, heavy industry and the radical right organized pressure that manufactured a popular will, amplified by the hardship of the Turnip Winter. The navy's strategic logic and the contradiction with the Hindenburg Programme reinforced this dynamic. American mediation failed because Berlin had no responsible partner. The study favors an institutional reading over Fischer's voluntarism.

Keywords: unrestricted submarine warfare; Bethmann Hollweg; civilian–military relations; public opinion; Imperial Germany

1.INTRODUCTION

The decision of the German Empire in January 1917 to launch "unrestricted submarine warfare" (Uneingeschränkter U-Boot-Krieg) constituted one of the most decisive and controversial moments in the history of the First World War. From a tactical military perspective, the decision appeared justified, as German submarines nearly achieved what the surface fleet had failed to accomplish. The peak of ship sinkings in the spring of 1917 reached astonishing rates of 773,000 tons per month (La Bruyère, 1934). However, from a strategic and diplomatic perspective, the decision had grave consequences, as it provoked the United States of America into entering the war and permanently shifted the balance of power against Germany.

The problem addressed by this research lies in the profound paradox raised by the decision: how did the German leadership insist on adopting a strategy that was known in advance to bring the world's largest industrial power into the war? And why did the current referred to as "political rationality," represented by Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, fail to impose its cautionary vision despite foreseeing the catastrophic consequences?

This study is based on the fundamental hypothesis that the decision to adopt unrestricted submarine warfare was not the product of neutral military calculations, but rather the culmination of a sharp internal struggle for power. A tripartite alliance of military leaders, industrialists, and the extreme right succeeded in imposing an artificial "popular will" on the government while ignoring diplomatic warnings that were evident through American mediation efforts (Mommsen, 1969, p. 141; Chickering, 2014, pp. 135–137)

To analyze this issue, this study relies on documented historical sources: the memoirs of military leaders (Scheer, 1920; Von Tirpitz, 1919), political documents and diplomatic memoranda (Seymour, 1926), the analysis of historian Wolfgang Mommsen regarding the internal political conflict, as well as recent academic studies (Chickering, 2014; Preston, 2003; McClung & Ross, 2017). The study is divided into three main sections: first, an analysis of the internal political conflict and the erosion of civilian authority; second, an examination of the military and strategic logic that led the navy and the army to adopt the submarine option; and third, a study of the diplomatic dimension and the American role, culminating in a conclusion that answers the central research question.

This study falls within the context of the historical debate initiated by the Fischer School concerning the nature of German decision-making during the First World War. Fischer himself documented in his analysis of the submarine crisis how political leaders were "bypassed" by the military-naval alliance (Fischer, 1967, p. 291), how industrialists pressured the Kaiser and military authorities to launch unrestricted warfare (Fischer, 1967, p. 292), and how discussions among the Kaiser, Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and Holtzendorff on January 9, 1917 resulted in a final decision to which Bethmann-Hollweg "yielded despite his personal convictions" (Fischer, 1967, pp. 304–305). However, the facts observed by Fischer go beyond his voluntarist interpretation. While he argued that the German elite consciously pursued expansion, this study—drawing on Mommsen and Gerwarth—demonstrates that the issue was fundamentally an institutional collapse, namely a structural incapacity of civilian authority in the face of the autonomy of military leadership, rather than merely a conscious expansionist will.

Section One: Internal Political Conflict and the Erosion of Civilian Authority (1915–1916) 1- The Emergence of the Submarine Warfare Crisis as a Matter of Public Opinion

Since the summer of 1915, a new and serious crisis began to take shape in Germany in the form of the issue of "unrestricted submarine warfare." The German political leadership, represented by Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, found it extremely difficult to convince public opinion and political parties of its repeated and retreating positions vis-à-vis the United States regarding the submarine issue. The problem was aggravated by the very small number of operational German submarines at that stage, prompting the Chancellor to secretly inform party leaders of the seriousness of the situation in an effort to avoid a media campaign against this strategy, particularly amid increasing right-wing agitation against any submission to the United States (Mommsen, 1969, p. 141).

This agitation was led particularly by Heydebrand, Bacmeister, and Fuhrman, with substantial participation from representatives of the Rhineland-Westphalian heavy industries such as Hirsch and Körting. Together they formed a pressure group aimed at undermining the Chancellor's position, as he sought to avoid provoking the United States of America (Mommsen, 1969, p. 141).

Bethmann-Hollweg's own memoirs reveal that this dynamic was not a product of the war itself but had existed years before. In October 1911, Heydebrand stood in parliament demanding a more assertive foreign policy, insisting that the sword was the only guarantor of peace. The Chancellor responded in the same chamber with the significant statement: "Strength does not need to brandish its sword" (Bethmann Hollweg, 1920, pp. 36–37). This early clash between the Chancellor's civilian rationality and the rhetoric of the radical right demonstrates that the tripartite alliance analyzed in this study—military leaders, industrialists, and the right wing was not a temporary formation created by wartime pressures but a deeply rooted political structure that predated the outbreak of war.

The Turnip Winter and the Crisis of Political Legitimacy in Germany: The Role of Famine in Strengthening Military Authority and Marginalizing Civilians (1916–1918)

The decision of 1917 was not merely the product of struggles behind closed doors; it was also influenced by a deteriorating social reality. The winter of 1916–1917, known in Germany as the *Steckrübenwinter* ("Turnip Winter"), marked a catastrophic turning point in the history of the First World War. Food shortages evolved from a temporary crisis into a widespread famine affecting all social classes. Following the failure of the potato harvest in the summer of 1916, the problem worsened because the army required all railway wagons to transport troops in response to the Romanian offensive, resulting in a

complete paralysis of food transportation. A potential crisis thus turned into a real catastrophe (Strauss, 1941, p. 390).

Food shortages became "acute among all classes of the population" (The German Food Situation, 1941, p. 2). Germans were forced to rely on turnips as the sole substitute for bread, potatoes, and meat. The

diet of working-class families suffered from severe deficiencies in protein and fat, causing workers to "suffer continually from hunger" (Strauss, 1941, p. 365). These harsh conditions on the home front created an atmosphere of public despair that right-wing propaganda exploited by presenting unrestricted submarine warfare as a defensive and necessary solution for survival. Meanwhile, Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg's warnings about the risks of American entry into the war appeared merely theoretical. From this perspective, he advocated caution and the avoidance of provoking the United States. Yet his appeal found no resonance among a population dying of hunger. In contrast, right-wing propaganda promoting the idea that unrestricted submarine warfare would starve Britain and force its surrender within months (Mommsen, 1969, p. 141) found fertile ground among a people watching their children waste away before their eyes.

Thus, the public question shifted from "Is this a dangerous gamble?" to "Do we have any choice other than ending the war at any cost?" This atmosphere of despair provided the Supreme Army Command (OHL) with "popular ammunition" that undermined the legitimacy of the civilian Chancellor and transformed the military option into a "national necessity" beyond discussion (Chickering, 2004, p. 165). As the Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung – OHL*) became the effective ruling authority under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, military leaders found in the suffering of the people what they had previously lacked: a popular legitimacy that the Chancellor could not confront.

In line with this context, Ludendorff himself provided direct military confirmation of this equation. In his memoirs, he wrote that deteriorating nutrition caused "a noticeable decline in physical and mental strength, leading to a state of weakness and instability that allowed enemy propaganda to find fertile ground and strengthen pacifist tendencies among many Germans" (Ludendorff, 1919, p. 316).

This admission from the highest military commander demonstrates that the "Turnip Winter" was not merely a humanitarian crisis but also a political weapon exploited by right-wing agitators to weaken any opposition to submarine warfare and to present this option as the sole solution for the survival of the German nation.

Accordingly, the decision of February 1917 was the product of a three-dimensional interaction: short-sighted military logic, the collapse of civilian institutions in the face of growing military dominance, and social pressures (embodied in the Turnip Winter) that created an environment favorable to risk-taking, making any retreat from the decision impossible despite many naval leaders' awareness of the dangers involved (Gross, 2005, p. 835).

The Escalation of 1916 and the Military Alliance Against the Chancellor

By 1916, a strong alliance had formed between the Naval General Staff and the Supreme Army Command, both of which began working together for the rapid resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. Bethmann-Hollweg understood better than anyone else that the slogan of "unrestricted submarine warfare" had become a means of influencing the German people even before producing any effects on the battlefronts. Amid the suffering caused by the harsh winter, this slogan promised a quick peace and thus became a genuine "mass opiate" (Mommsen, 1969, p. 141).

Bethmann-Hollweg had long been aware of this structural imbalance of power. In his memoirs, he observed that the naval leadership had "appropriated political authority beyond its official functions" and that "in every conflict between naval authority and the political administration, public opinion generally sided with the former" (Bethmann Hollweg, 1920, pp. 90–91).

Accordingly, this admission was not merely a personal complaint but a structural diagnosis of the dilemma—a reflection on the nature of the German political system at the time. In 1916, the Chancellor was not merely confronting political opponents; he faced an entire institutional system in which popular legitimacy consistently favored the military over civilian authority. This was precisely the reality that Mommsen identified in his analysis of the relationship between Bethmann-Hollweg and public opinion.

For this reason, the Chancellor fought the agitation by every available means. He requested that the War Press Office impose strict censorship on newspaper articles dealing with the issue and asked the Reich Naval Office and the Admiralty Staff on January 9, 1916, to ensure the suppression of all discussions concerning the submarine question. He also sought to exercise restraint in his dealings with members of parliament and public figures (Mommsen, 1969, p. 141).

These measures do not appear to have been merely a temporary reaction but rather a reflection of a comprehensive political strategy that Bethmann-Hollweg had pursued since the beginning of the war. This is explained by the memoirs of his close adviser Kurt Riezler, which reveal that Bethmann sought from the outset of the war to pursue what Riezler called the "Policy of the Diagonal" (*Politik der Diagonale*), namely

the search for a middle path between the conservative right and the reformist left in order to preserve internal unity (Riezler, 2008, p. II).

This explains why his handling of military pressure and pressure from right-wing parties was not hesitation but fidelity to a coherent political method based on preserving the *Burgfrieden*, the civil truce that ensured the mobilization of all social classes for the war effort

Breaching Censorship and Parliamentary Pressure

Despite these measures, Bethmann Hollweg's attempts failed. The conservative opposition, led by Heydebrand, managed to circumvent censorship by securing a resolution from the reinforced Budget Committee of the Prussian House of Representatives opposing any governmental concessions on the submarine issue, and immediately published this resolution, despite its official secrecy, in a move aimed at increasing public pressure on the government (Mommsen, 1969, p. 141).

In reality, Bethmann Hollweg temporarily succeeded in blocking this move, describing it as an unauthorized intervention by the Prussian government in the "Imperial leadership," and he also managed to persuade the leaders of the Prussian parliamentary group to withdraw their resolution during a secret meeting held on 14 February 1916. However, this was only a temporary and fragile victory (Mommsen, 1969, p. 141), which merely delayed unrestricted submarine warfare.

The Position of Political Parties: Between Right-Wing Agitation and Parliamentary Hesitation

The conflict over submarine warfare was not limited to the confrontation between the Chancellor and the military; it also extended to the political parties in the Reichstag. The conservative right, led by Heydebrand and his associates Bacmeister and Fuhrman, conducted a broad agitation campaign, supported by representatives of heavy industry such as Hirsch and Körting, to pressure for the adoption of unrestricted submarine warfare (Mommsen, 1969, p. 141). In contrast, Bethmann Hollweg sought to win over influential deputies such as Erzberger in order to influence the Catholic press (Mommsen, 1969, p. 143). He also summoned party leaders to the Reichstag and explained the political and military situation to them in detail (Mommsen, 1969, p. 143). Although he temporarily succeeded in obtaining a "formal" parliamentary resolution in May 1916 granting the government freedom of action, pressure from the right and industrial circles continued, as they persisted in promoting the idea that submarine warfare was the "decisive weapon" that would secure the long-awaited peace (Mommsen, 1969, pp. 144–145). With the rise of the influence of the Supreme Army Command (OHL) under Hindenburg and Ludendorff in the summer of 1916, it became increasingly difficult for moderate parties to balance the growing military influence (Chickering, 2014, p. 103).

The Organized Propaganda Campaign and the Role of the Navy

Bethmann Hollweg clearly observed this mechanism in his memoirs, noting that doubts raised about his policy of reaching an understanding with England were "silenced by agitational noise" rather than by argument and evidence (Bethmann Hollweg, 1920, p. 91). This description reveals the Chancellor's full awareness that the propaganda campaign supporting submarine warfare was not a spontaneous expression of genuine popular will, but rather a manufactured will used to silence rational voices and narrow the Chancellor's political room for maneuver. This reinforces Mommsen's observation that the public pressure exerted on Bethmann Hollweg was, in essence, organized pressure rather than a reflection of spontaneous public sentiment.

This period was marked by an organized propaganda escalation. The Chancellor recognized the growing public agitation in favor of unrestricted submarine warfare despite stricter censorship regulations, and his team in the Reich Chancellery gathered several indications suggesting active influence by the Reich Naval Office itself on far-right circles. In the second half of February 1916, the right-wing activist Reventlow publicly demanded in the newspapers *Deutsche Tageszeitung* and *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, both close to the navy, the "immediate adoption of unrestricted submarine warfare," without any intervention from the

censors (Mommsen, 1969, p. 142).

Even more alarming was the fact that Bethmann Hollweg became convinced that the German Imperial Navy (Kaiserliche Marine) was preparing to make an Admiralty memorandum written by the Berlin banker Voss available to a large segment of the public. This memorandum advocated unrestricted submarine warfare and formed the basis of the navy's calculations. The Chancellor feared that this memorandum, which he described as "convincing to neutral readers through its scientific presentation," would be used to spread the navy's position and mobilize public opinion against the civilian government (Mommsen, 1969, p. 142).

The Counteroffensive and Bethmann's Final Attempts

Faced with this challenge, Bethmann Hollweg launched a counteroffensive and sent an urgent appeal to General Falkenhayn to officially prohibit such discussions in the press in the future. He believed that if such "unscrupulous newspaper articles" were published, they would have grave consequences. Instead, he proposed promoting the view that submarine warfare should not be ruled out as a last resort, while warning that maintaining the status quo would rapidly lead to the collapse of the German economy, followed by a severe depression that would paralyze the will to continue the war (Mommsen, 1969, p. 142).

Encouraged by his colleagues in the Reich Chancellery, Bethmann Hollweg went even further by exploiting Emperor Wilhelm II's view that the government should never bow to public opinion and should transfer responsibility for the press (Mommsen, 1969, p. 142). He resorted to exceptional measures:

He requested Deputy Erzberger to influence the newspaper *Kölnische Volkszeitung* in his favor. The Chancellor's Office used the newspaper to send signals abroad (especially to Washington and the Vatican) that Germany's civilian government still controlled affairs and opposed reckless military escalation. This may have been a preliminary step toward opening the door to early peace negotiations.

He summoned party leaders to the Reichstag, as well as Heydebrand, the principal organizer of the campaign, and explained the situation to them in detail.

Finally, on 15 March 1916, he issued a direct appeal to the press to calm public opinion, an exceptional step in the governmental practice of the German Empire. In his speech, the Chancellor openly justified his policy on the submarine issue and asked journalists to use their "enormous influence" to restore internal unity (Mommsen, 1969, pp. 142–143).

Institutional Conflict and Tirpitz's Resignation:

The internal conflict between Germany's civilian and military institutions further aggravated the situation. One of its consequences was that Admiral Tirpitz was forced to resign because of his continued refusal to submit to the supervision of the Imperial Naval Office within the German Admiralty, which he regarded as a grave insult to himself and his organization. Although Bethmann Hollweg was aware of the serious collapse in public opinion that would result from this, the Chancellor realized that he had to confront this dangerous rival, who enjoyed broad popular support (Mommsen, 1969, p. 143).

A Temporary Victory and the Fragility of Stability

Deep frustration and widespread depression prevailed among the German public and naval personnel following the decision to abandon unrestricted submarine warfare. Bethmann Hollweg did everything in his power to raise morale, explaining the position of political leaders in newspapers close to the government while simultaneously refuting reports that spoke of restrictions on what had become popularly known as "unrestricted submarine warfare" (Mommsen, 1969, p. 143).

The Chancellor succeeded in resisting the pressure exerted by right-wing parties in favor of unrestricted submarine warfare through the speech he delivered before the Reichstag Budget Committee on 15 May 1916. His principal aim was to secure parliamentary support in order to "direct the enthusiasm prevailing among the German people"—which he acknowledged existed and considered harmful to "our war and our homeland"—"in the right direction and establish a calming influence." In response, the centrist parties did not dare ignore his persuasive arguments, and the Reichstag ultimately adopted a weak resolution that essentially endorsed unrestricted submarine warfare while at the same time granting the government the necessary freedom of action (Mommsen, 1969, p. 144).

As a result, the crisis ended with a relative stabilization of Bethmann Hollweg's position, as he once again succeeded in affirming that the government should not be compelled during wartime to adopt specific political decisions against its will through irresponsible agitation. In reality, however, this temporary success did not come without consequences, as the National Liberal Party felt compelled to justify its retreat in a secret official circular addressed to its supporters (Mommsen, 1969, p. 144).

Beneath the Surface: The Continuation of Agitation

Despite the temporary success achieved by the Chancellor, the situation remained tense and on the verge of collapse, particularly when the strenuous efforts made by political leaders to provide objective information failed to dispel the notion that "unrestricted submarine warfare" was the weapon through which the desired peace could be achieved. Instead, this idea spread secretly through memoranda and petitions circulated by "irresponsible agitators such as Vormann and Backmeister, influential financial representatives of industry such as Hirsch and Körting," and "unscrupulous and naïve intellectuals," such as Eduard Meyer, in the words of the German historian Mommsen (Mommsen, 1969, p. 145).

As for the official memorandum of the Admiralty Staff, it "entered into a feverish campaign of

agitation," exactly as Bethmann Hollweg had feared from the outset. The memorandum, written by the banker Voss on behalf of the Reich Naval Office, was officially distributed to a large number of representatives of German business circles. The result was precisely what Bethmann Hollweg had sought to prevent by every means: the emergence of conflicting views between the military leadership—especially the navy—and the political leadership in public opinion. There was no longer any possibility of unity among government departments regarding the issue of influence (Mommsen, 1969, p. 145).

Section Two: The Submarine as a Decisive Weapon in Military and Strategic Logic (1914–1917)

Strategic Frustration and the Inadequacy of the Surface Fleet

To understand this military logic from within, Ludendorff's memoirs provide a detailed and candid account of the framework that shaped the thinking of the Supreme Command. He described the conviction that gradually formed from August 1916 onward:

"Unrestricted submarine warfare was the only remaining means of securing a victorious end to the war within a reasonable time; and if this warfare was capable of being decisive, as the naval authorities assured us it was, then it was our clear military duty to the German nation to undertake it" (Ludendorff, 1919, p. 309).

This formulation is of considerable analytical importance. Ludendorff did not present submarines as a strategic option open to debate, but rather as a "military duty" beyond reconsideration. This logic explains why Bethmann Hollweg's arguments failed to have any real impact on the decisions of the Supreme Command at that time.

It should be noted in this context that Bethmann Hollweg's position regarding German naval power was not that of a neutral observer. From a political perspective, he regarded excessive naval expansion as an obstacle to diplomacy. In his memoirs, he expressed his personal willingness "to go as far as making concessions on the question of naval expansion, provided that I could obtain a counterbalancing political agreement with London" (Bethmann Hollweg, 1920, pp. 57–58). This reveals that the disagreement between the Chancellor and the navy was not a tactical dispute over the timing of submarine deployment, but a fundamental strategic disagreement over the nature of Germany's national interest: should it be achieved through diplomatic accommodation or through naval power? When the logic of force triumphed in 1917, it represented the defeat of the political vision that Bethmann Hollweg had long defended.

In addition to social pressures, understanding the deeper motivations that led the German military leadership to embrace unrestricted submarine warfare requires returning to the strategic frustration experienced by the German surface fleet from the beginning of the war. Germany had built its fleet to protect its maritime interests, and its purpose was inherently defensive rather than offensive. Its principal strength lay in battleships and torpedo boats designed exclusively for naval combat. By contrast, the number of cruisers was so small that they barely sufficed for scouting a moving fleet, making them unsuitable for threatening the commerce of Germany's enemies (Von Tirpitz, 1919).

In contrast, Britain pursued a naval policy aimed at cutting off all supplies to Germany by sea, with the goal of starving it through the blockade of foodstuffs and raw materials. This blockade imposed by the Royal Navy placed Germany in a suffocating defensive position and compelled the German leadership to search for any means capable of breaking the encirclement (Von Tirpitz, 1919).

The Submarine as a Strategic Alternative

Faced with this predicament, the submarine emerged as an alternative instrument capable of altering the balance. Admiral Reinhard Scheer, commander of the German High Seas Fleet (Hochseeflotte), described the logic that led the navy to adopt the submarine option in the report he submitted to the Emperor, explaining that a swift victory in the war could only be expected through the "destruction of English economic life" by means of submarine operations against British commerce.

Nevertheless, the Admiral advised the Emperor not to rush into any ill-considered decision, because the consequences of submarine warfare might prove disproportionate to the expected gains, especially in British waters where American interests were widespread, making it extremely difficult to avoid incidents that might force Germany into humiliating concessions (Scheer, 1920). It appears that the purpose of this naval war, according to Scheer, was to demonstrate to the world that the British Navy no longer possessed the power of which it had once boasted. He concluded that "there is no alternative to the full employment of submarines as an instrument of war in order to seize England's vital nerve" (Scheer, 1920).

The Battle of Jutland (Skagerrak): Evidence of Strategic Impotence

The Battle of Jutland (Battle of Jutland), or the Battle of Skagerrak (Skagerrak) as the Germans called it, which took place on 31 May 1916, confirmed this strategic impotence despite being a decisive milestone in

the development of German strategic thought. From a tactical perspective, the Germans achieved impressive results according to German reports. British losses amounted to 169,200 tons, including one battleship of the *Queen Elizabeth* class, three battlecruisers (*Queen Mary*, *Indefatigable*, *Invincible*), four armored cruisers, two light cruisers, and 13 destroyers. In contrast, German losses amounted to only 60,730 tons, including the battlecruiser *Lützow*, the old battleship *Pommern*, four light cruisers, and five torpedo boats (vom Hofe, 1917; Scheer, 1920).

However, the British account differs fundamentally. In his official report published on 6 July 1916, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, commander of the British Grand Fleet, estimated German losses at approximately 109,220 tons compared to British losses of 112,250 tons, making the losses very close in scale (Jellicoe, 1916, p. 934). Jellicoe identified German losses as two modern battleships (dreadnought type), an old *Deutschland*-class battleship seen sinking, the battlecruiser *Lützow*, another battlecruiser, five light cruisers, six destroyers, and one submarine (Jellicoe, 1916, p. 934). The report also acknowledged Britain's loss of five major vessels: *Queen Mary*, *Indefatigable*, *Invincible*, *Defense*, *Black Prince*, and *Warrior* (Jellicoe, 1916, pp. 934–935). Jellicoe further noted that "the conditions of reduced visibility under which the daylight action was fought, and the approach of darkness, increased the difficulty of providing an accurate report of the damage inflicted or the names of the ships sunk by the British naval forces" (Jellicoe, 1916, p. 934).

This significant discrepancy in casualty estimates reflects the battle of numbers and narratives that accompanied the engagement. In the conclusion of his report, Jellicoe affirmed that the German fleet "showed no sign" of returning to the engagement, leading the British to conclude that the German High Seas Fleet had returned to its base (Jellicoe, 1916, p. 938). He also emphasized that the British fleet remained in the vicinity of the battlefield until 11 a.m. the following day, despite the risks of operating in waters close to hostile German shores, in search of the enemy (Jellicoe, 1916, p. 938).

In the aftermath of the battle, the Germans focused on tactical superiority and the exchange ratio, namely the ratio of losses between the two sides, whereas the British focused on the fact that the German fleet had withdrawn to its ports and no longer threatened the naval blockade. Consequently, the strategic outcome favored Britain despite the tactical losses. This was confirmed by Jellicoe in his official report, noting that the British fleet had been refueled, rearmed, and was ready for operations by the morning of 2 June (Jellicoe, 1916, p. 938), while the German fleet remained confined to its ports.

Despite this controversy over losses, Admiral Reinhard Scheer realized that these results, regardless of their accuracy, would not force England to surrender. The German leadership acknowledged that neither the disadvantages of Germany's geographical position relative to that of the British Empire nor the enemy's overwhelming material superiority could be overcome through surface fleet engagements alone (Scheer, 1920). This realization increasingly drove the navy to focus on submarines as the sole strategic hope.

Calculations of Success: The Mathematical Logic of Submarines

Supporters of submarine warfare relied on mathematical and economic calculations that appeared convincing. Britain, whose population at the time did not exceed 2% of the world's population, accounted for one-fifth of global trade, two-fifths of manufacturing, and one-third of global merchant shipping. As the British economy shifted from agriculture to industry, free trade and imported foodstuffs became essential for meeting the basic needs of its population. By 1914, 60% of all food consumed in Britain was imported from abroad (Greenwood, 2021). Accordingly, German leaders realized that it would be impossible to force Britain out of the war early through direct military confrontation. To achieve victory, they had to isolate Britain from the outside world, including from the United States, which at the time possessed the largest industrial economy in the world. The British and Germans entered into an economic war in which each side sought to strangle the other's imports. The British imposed a strict naval blockade by seizing shipments bound for Germany, benefiting from their control over supply lines. Germany responded with an initial wave of traditional maritime commerce attacks using surface vessels before gradually shifting, beginning in 1915, to unrestricted submarine warfare as a strategic weapon (Friedman, 2014).

The Evolution of Submarine Strategies in the First World War: From Prize Law to Unrestricted Warfare

Commercial warfare began with the use of submarines as an effective countermeasure against the British blockade. However, because of protests from the United States, this warfare initially took a restrained form, requiring submarines first to determine whether they were dealing with neutral or non-neutral vessels under Prize Law. This procedure posed a significant danger to submarines, which were forced to surface and thus became vulnerable to direct attack. More dangerously, British warships exploited this situation by flying neutral flags as a means of deception (Von Tirpitz, 1919).

In light of these circumstances, pressure within the German Navy increased in favor of adopting a more effective strategy. On 4 February 1915, Germany officially announced a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare to begin on 18 February of the same year. The waters surrounding Great Britain, except for a designated route north of Scotland, were declared a war zone in which all enemy vessels would be destroyed, even if risks to their crews and passengers could not be avoided (Preston, 2003). The German declaration explicitly acknowledged that "it may not always be possible to prevent attacks directed against enemy ships from affecting neutral vessels" (Preston, 2003).

The German Supreme Army Command and Its Role in the Decision for Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

The motives behind adopting unrestricted submarine warfare were not confined to the German Navy alone. The Supreme Army Command (Oberste Heeresleitung – OHL), under Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff, played a pivotal role in pushing for this option during the autumn of 1916. Given the relative improvement in the military situation, German generals expressed their willingness to accept the risks associated with American entry into the war (Mommsen, 1969, p. 148).

In this context, on 22 December 1916, Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff, relying on this strong support, issued a memorandum calling for "the early commencement of the unrestricted submarine campaign." It stated:

"The war must be decided before the autumn of 1917 in order to avoid the exhaustion of all parties, which could lead to disaster for us. Among our enemies, Italy and France have suffered severe economic damage, to the point that England depends on them for its capacity to continue. If we succeed in weakening England, the war will immediately be decided in our favor" (Scheer, 1920).

Ludendorff's memoirs document in great detail the mechanism through which the final decision was taken during the meeting of 9 January 1917, chaired by the Kaiser at Pless Palace. He reported that Hindenburg presented the position of the Supreme Command and recommended launching the campaign, while "the Chancellor explained the effect this measure might have on neutral countries, particularly the United States, and considered its entry into the war possible, indeed probable" (Ludendorff, 1919, p. 317).

The most revealing aspect of Ludendorff's account is his description of the Chancellor's hesitation:

"The Chancellor, true to his nature, remained hesitant and arrived at conclusions such as: the decision to launch the campaign depends on its expected effects; if the military authorities regard it as necessary, I am not in a position to resist them; and if victory appears on the horizon, then we must act" (Ludendorff, 1919, p. 317).

Does this indicate that the Chancellor was not overpowered by force but rather acquiesced voluntarily once he realized that the system left him no alternative?

What Kurt Riezler's diaries document regarding this transformation deepens the analytical picture. The Chancellor's close associate observed that Bethmann Hollweg believed in the gradual strengthening of parliamentary elements in the face of military dominance and that he faced a structural rather than personal conflict with Hindenburg and Ludendorff, both of whom opposed any increase in parliamentary influence (Riezler, 2008, p. IV). This perhaps explains why Ludendorff himself described Bethmann Hollweg at the 9 January meeting as "hesitant by nature," a man who understood that the decision was in reality beyond his effective authority within a system whose balance of legitimacy consistently favored the military establishment.

The Voss Memorandum: Employing Science in the Service of Propaganda

In the context of strengthening the drive toward unrestricted submarine warfare, the matter extended beyond military decisions to include the use of scientific and economic tools in support of the propaganda campaign favoring this option. The memorandum prepared by the Berlin banker Voss provides a striking example of how scientific and economic expertise was employed to support the campaign for submarine warfare.

This memorandum, which advocated unrestricted submarine warfare, formed the basis of German naval calculations and served as a scientific reference that convinced many neutral readers, "according to Bethmann Hollweg's description" (Mommsen, 1969, p. 142). The Reich Naval Office worked to circulate the memorandum among businessmen and elites, creating the widespread impression that economic and military experts supported the decision, in contrast to certain politicians who were portrayed as "defeatists."

From Scientific Propaganda to Political Decision: The Declaration of German Submarine Warfare on 1 February 1917

The propaganda campaign supported by scientific and economic expertise contributed to creating the political and social atmosphere necessary for making the decisive decision regarding submarine

warfare. After prolonged debate, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg was compelled to yield to the demands of the navy, the Supreme Army Command, and the Kaiser by launching unrestricted submarine warfare despite his doubts concerning its effectiveness. This strategy was regarded as the "last card" that had to be played regardless of the consequences, as it was widely believed that it would force Britain to surrender by cutting off its supplies (Mommsen, 1969, p. 156).

Unrestricted submarine warfare officially began on 1 February 1917 and achieved substantial initial successes. The total tonnage of ships sunk in April 1917 exceeded 860,000 tons (Abbatiello, 2006), posing a genuine threat of starving Britain into submission. However, the political concerns that Bethmann Hollweg had warned about quickly materialized, as the escalation of the war led to the entry of the United States into the conflict, permanently altering the balance of power.

The Convoy System and Its Role in Reversing the Balance of Naval Warfare

Faced with the escalating losses suffered by the Allied merchant fleet as a result of unrestricted submarine warfare, it became necessary to seek innovative solutions to reduce these losses. Thus emerged the **Convoy System**, developed by the Allied Powers in mid-1917 as a powerful response to unrestricted submarine warfare. British Prime Minister **David Lloyd George** was among the most prominent advocates of this system and successfully pressured the British Admiralty to implement it experimentally on 30 April 1917 (Herwig & Trask, 1971, p. 615). This system, which relied on grouping merchant ships into convoys protected by destroyers and cruisers, made them difficult targets for submarines and immediately led to a noticeable reduction in maritime losses (Herwig & Trask, 1971, p. 615).

The system required the provision of large numbers of destroyers and anti-submarine warfare assets, prompting the United States to expand its small warship construction programs. At a meeting of a special committee in the **Navy Department**, chaired by Captain **William V. Pratt**, the committee recommended the construction of two hundred additional destroyers, a proposal that Secretary of the Navy **Josephus Daniels** immediately approved (Herwig & Trask, 1971, p. 617).

By 20 May 1917, the German Embassy in Switzerland informed Berlin that submarines had succeeded in sinking only one ship out of sixty-nine vessels in a wheat convoy arriving from America and that British authorities had become convinced that submarines were no longer capable of cutting off American supplies (Herwig & Trask, 1971, p. 620). The report further stated that "the American fleet will share escort duties with the British fleet, which will lead to a relative decline in sinking rates, and there is now no hope that submarine warfare will force England into peace or compel Lloyd George to negotiate" (Herwig & Trask, 1971, p. 620).

In contrast, the German leadership failed to develop an effective strategy to counter the convoy system. Chancellor **Bethmann Hollweg** had already warned the Emperor in February 1916 against relying on the Admiralty's optimistic estimates, pointing out that the convoy system could reduce the effectiveness of submarines. The success of the system resulted in a decline in sinking rates from their peak of 900,000 tons in April 1917 to less than 350,000 tons per month in the following months (Herwig & Trask, 1971, pp. 620–621).

The Hindenburg Programme: Industrial Mobilization and Its Impact on Submarine Warfare During the First World War

The **Hindenburg Programme**, led by Field Marshal **Paul von Hindenburg** and General **Erich Ludendorff** in the autumn of 1916, represented the height of strategic contradiction. While unrestricted submarine warfare was premised on achieving a swift victory within a few months, the programme revealed Germany's need for long-term mobilization. This contradiction, combined with shortages of labor and raw materials, delayed the delivery of new submarines and undermined the effectiveness of the campaign at its decisive moment (Morrow, 1977, pp. 36, 43).

Through his personal testimony, Ludendorff highlighted the structural contradiction between the military leadership and the civilian government in Germany during the First World War. He sharply criticized the government's hesitation in implementing a comprehensive mobilization programme, stating:

"We struggled for a long time to convince the government, and after two months of delay and exhausting pressure from the Supreme Command, the government finally introduced the Auxiliary Service Bill in November, which was passed on the second of December. It was neither one thing nor the other. We wanted something comprehensive."

He added that, in practice, the law was "only a shadow of the reality we sought." This testimony is significant as evidence from a primary military source demonstrating that the contradiction between comprehensive military ambition and civilian incapacity to implement it was structural, and that the

Supreme Command was aware of this deficiency yet continued to operate despite it (Ludendorff, 1919, p. 329).

The programme exposed the limitations of German industrial capabilities, which negatively affected the submarine campaign itself. Just as aircraft production targets were delayed—deliveries falling from 900 aircraft in December 1916 to only 400 in February 1917—submarine construction suffered from the same structural problems: shortages of skilled labor, massive inflation in raw material prices (which had risen by 232% by July 1917), and poor coordination among mobilization agencies (Morrow, 1977, pp. 45–46). These problems delayed the delivery of new submarines and undermined the effectiveness of the naval campaign at critical moments.

The paradox reached its peak with the launch of the **America Program** in June 1917, which came as a direct response to the United States' entry into the First World War. This development was precisely what Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare strategy had sought to avoid. As a result of the failure of the gamble on a quick victory, Germany was forced to increase its war production dramatically in order to confront the enormous industrial capabilities of the United States, in a race whose outcome had already been predetermined (Morrow, 1977, p. 47).

Thus, the decision to launch unrestricted submarine warfare appeared fundamentally inconsistent with the Hindenburg Programme, which aimed at the comprehensive mobilization of German resources. The former was based on the assumption that the war could be ended before American intervention, whereas the latter implicitly acknowledged that the war would be prolonged and that Germany required total mobilization—a task that was nearly impossible given its limited resources and the Allies' industrial superiority.

Morrow concluded that the German Army had fallen into an "inescapable strategic dilemma" (Morrow, 1977, p. 51). This dilemma explains the failure of unrestricted submarine warfare: the military decision was a gamble lacking a sustainable industrial and economic foundation and rested on the unrealistic hope of achieving a rapid victory despite the Allies' clear material superiority.

The Paradox of Submarine Warfare: Tactical Victory and Strategic Collapse

By July 1917, it had become clear that unrestricted submarine warfare had failed to achieve its intended strategic objectives, despite military successes that exceeded initial expectations. German submarines succeeded in sinking record numbers of ships, but the political cost was immense: the entry of the United States into the war on the side of the Allied Powers (Mommsen, 1969, p. 156).

As political and military pressures intensified, Chancellor **Bethmann Hollweg** resigned on 15 July 1917, realizing the impossibility of remaining in office amid growing opposition from party leaders and the Supreme Army Command. A few days later, **Scheffer**, the National Liberal Reichstag representative and a close associate of the Chancellor, wrote in his memoirs: "The fall of Bethmann Hollweg is a catastrophe because of its timing and a disgrace because of the manner in which it occurred. Yet he is not entirely free of responsibility for his downfall. A statesman, especially in such times, must know what he wants. Others do not need to know what he wants, but they must know that he knows what he wants..." (Mommsen, 1969, p. 158). The escalation of submarine warfare had a profound impact on the international situation, particularly with regard to the United States, which found itself compelled to reconsider its traditional policy of neutrality.

Section Three: American Diplomacy Between Neutrality and Confrontation During the First World War (1915–1917)

The American Position Between Conditional Neutrality and Diplomatic Initiatives Since the outbreak of the First World War, the United States maintained a position of neutrality while simultaneously insisting on its rights as a neutral nation in trade and maritime navigation. President **Woodrow Wilson** warned from the outset that the United States would not abandon its traditional right to trade with belligerent nations and declared that Germany would be held to a "strict accountability" for the loss of American ships or lives (Seymour, 1926).

Following Germany's declaration of a war zone around the British Isles on 4 February 1915 and its warning to neutral vessels against entering the area, the United States responded firmly. On 12 February 1915, it submitted a formal protest note expressing its rejection of German submarine warfare. Germany nevertheless continued its campaign, while issuing instructions to submarine commanders to avoid targeting neutral ships within the restricted maritime zones (Von Tirpitz, 1919).

The Lusitania Incident and Its Role in Transforming American Policy

On 7 May 1915, the German submarine **U-20** sank the British luxury liner **RMS Lusitania** off the

southern coast of Ireland, resulting in the deaths of 1,198 people, including 128 American citizens. This event marked a pivotal turning point in the American attitude toward the First World War, leading to a significant decline in American sympathy for Germany and increasing domestic calls for a firmer stance against it (Preston, 2003).

Historian **Diana Preston** notes that the incident brought about a fundamental shift in American public opinion, with widespread demands for a declaration of war against Germany. Nevertheless, President Woodrow Wilson preferred to pursue a diplomatic course, sending an official note to the German government demanding appropriate compensation for the American victims.

The German government initially refused to accept full responsibility for the incident, claiming that the ship had been carrying munitions and was equipped with guns for the Allied Powers. The American administration rejected these claims, asserting that the German information was inaccurate (Preston, 2003).

Colonel Edward House and American Shadow Diplomacy During the First World War Colonel **Edward House**, the closest adviser and personal friend of President Woodrow Wilson, was one of the leading representatives of unofficial American diplomacy during the First World War. Beginning in January 1915, Wilson entrusted him with a secret mission to Europe to explore the possibilities of American mediation in achieving peace among the belligerent powers (Seymour, 1926).

House's memoirs (*The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*) reveal the extent of the diplomatic challenges he encountered during this mission. On 12 February 1915, he received an official invitation from the German government to visit Berlin, but German Foreign Minister **Arthur Zimmermann** rejected the proposal to compensate Belgium, thereby complicating the negotiations (Seymour, 1926). At the same time, British officials advised House not to rush into visiting Germany, reflecting the atmosphere of mutual suspicion that surrounded unofficial American initiatives. These developments demonstrate both the limits of the American role at that stage and the importance of parallel diplomacy in shaping international politics during the war.

House in Berlin: Meeting with Bethmann Hollweg

After completing his talks in London and Paris, Colonel Edward House moved on to Berlin, where he met German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg and Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann. According to House's papers, these meetings revealed the extent of the structural complexities afflicting German diplomacy, particularly the sharp tensions between the civilian authorities represented by the Chancellor and the military and naval authorities represented by Alfred von Tirpitz and Erich von Falkenhayn, in addition to Kaiser Wilhelm II (Seymour, 1926).

House observed that Bethmann Hollweg was engaged in a fierce conflict with Tirpitz, while relations between the Foreign Ministry and the naval command were characterized by considerable tension. These internal divisions weakened Germany's ability to present a unified position during negotiations, thereby further complicating House's diplomatic mission (Seymour, 1926).

The Arabic and Sussex Crises and Diplomatic Escalation

On 19 August 1915, the sinking of the steamship *Arabic* by the German submarine U-24 triggered a new diplomatic crisis between Germany and the United States. Count Johann von Bernstorff, the German ambassador in Washington, sought to contain the repercussions of the incident, proposing Germany's willingness to modify its submarine warfare policy against civilian vessels. Owing to his efforts, the German government issued an official disclaimer of responsibility for the incident (Seymour, 1926).

Despite this temporary retreat, diplomatic pressures continued. On 24 March 1916, the steamship *Sussex* was struck by a torpedo while crossing the English Channel, prompting the American administration under President Woodrow Wilson to send a strongly worded protest note threatening to sever diplomatic relations with Germany unless it ceased targeting merchant and passenger ships (Seymour, 1926). Consequently, the German government responded by issuing what became known as the *Sussex Pledge*, in which it committed not to attack merchant vessels without prior warning, a step that temporarily eased tensions between the two countries.

Germany's Rejection of House's Proposal for a Settlement:

Among the solutions proposed by Colonel House to Wilson in the aftermath of the *Lusitania* crisis was that Germany abandon submarine warfare in exchange for Britain easing its food blockade. Wilson viewed this proposal as a potential solution to the conflict (Seymour, 1926) and as a possible means of preventing escalation and resolving the crisis at its roots.

However, Germany categorically rejected the proposal because, according to House's analysis, the military controlled the decision-making process (Seymour, 1926).

Ambassador Bernstorff's Role and the Final Efforts to Prevent a Break:

House's papers confirmed the pivotal role played by the German ambassador in Washington, Count Johann von Bernstorff, in seeking to prevent war between the United States and Germany. Bernstorff made strenuous efforts to obtain specific assurances from his government in order to keep the United States outside the conflict and to enhance the prospects for peace through President Wilson (Seymour, 1926). On 19 January 1917, Bernstorff received notification of Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, and on 31 January of the same month he informed U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing that Germany was withdrawing from its previous submarine pledge (Seymour, 1926). Bernstorff realized that this decision would inevitably lead to a confrontation with the United States.

The Break and the United States' Declaration of War

On 31 January 1917, the German government officially announced the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare effective 1 February, a decision that represented a complete undermining of the diplomatic efforts undertaken by both House and Bernstorff over the previous two years. On 3 February 1917, President Woodrow Wilson severed diplomatic relations with Germany. This was followed by the sinking of five American ships, prompting Wilson to address Congress on 2 April 1917 and request a declaration of war against Germany. In his speech, Wilson affirmed that the United States could no longer continue its policy of neutrality and called upon Congress to recognize that "the Imperial German Government has committed repeated acts of war against the people of the United States." Congress approved the declaration of war, and the United States officially entered the conflict on 6 April 1917 (Seymour, 1926).

Why Did Diplomacy Fail?

An examination of House's papers and diplomatic documents reveals a fundamental reason for the failure of American efforts: there was no "responsible partner" with whom to negotiate in Berlin. While Bethmann Hollweg and Bernstorff leaned toward compromise and diplomatic settlement, actual authority rested in the hands of military leaders (Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and Tirpitz), who firmly believed that submarines were the decisive weapon that would secure victory before America could intervene effectively.

Analysis of House's papers showed that the Kaiser and the military distrusted Bernstorff and regarded his concessions as excessive. Moreover, Bethmann Hollweg himself, despite recognizing the dangers, was unable to impose his vision on the army (Seymour, 1926).

It appears that the active American diplomacy embodied by House at the time found no resonance in the face of Germany's internal rigidity. Accordingly, it may be argued that House's mission failed not because the United States lacked a desire for peace, but because the military controlled the levers of decision-making in Berlin, making any political settlement impossible.

Thus, diplomacy closed its doors not merely because of a will for war, but because of a profound structural incapacity at the heart of the Imperial German state, a conclusion confirmed by the final analytical synthesis.

Answer to the Research Problem:

Based on the foregoing, the research problem may be answered as follows:

Why did the German leadership insist on adopting the strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare despite the warnings?

The German leadership insisted on this option because the decision-making process in Berlin was not governed by the logic of political rationality but by the logic of an internal struggle for power. The submarine warfare decision was, in essence, an instrument used by the military leadership (Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and Tirpitz) to impose its dominance over the state and subordinate civilian authority.

Why did the rational political faction fail to impose its vision?

Bethmann Hollweg failed because he represented a civilian institution with weak foundations in a state dominated by military logic, where civilian institutions were incapable of balancing the growing influence of the military.

CONCLUSION

An examination of the previous three sections reveals a recurring pattern in Bethmann Hollweg's strategic thinking. As Konrad Jarausch observed in his analysis of the July 1914 Crisis, the Chancellor divided the possible scenarios into an ideal "local war," an acceptable "continental war," and a catastrophic "world war" (Jarausch, 1969, pp. 58–59). In 1917, he faced a similar equation: a successful submarine war that would starve Britain, a limited war that would keep the United States neutral, or a world war involving American intervention. In both cases, he wagered on the most favorable scenario despite his own internal warnings,

driven by the military's belief that the "decisive weapon" would achieve victory before the enemy could respond.

The structural problem within the German political system, namely the autonomy of the military command (*Kommandogewalt*) and the Chancellor's weakness in relation to it (Jarausch, 1969, pp. 52, 71), explains Bethmann Hollweg's failure to impose his cautionary vision on Tirpitz and the navy. This was not merely a personal shortcoming but rather the inevitable consequence of a structural illness within the Imperial German state, in which military logic overwhelmed rational political calculations. The central paradox identified by Jarausch—that the Chancellor pursued defensive objectives through offensive means (Jarausch, 1969, p. 57)—applies perfectly to the submarine warfare decision: a defensive objective of breaking the British blockade through the provocative offensive means of sinking ships without warning.

As his close adviser Riezler described, Bethmann Hollweg embarked upon a "Leap into the Dark" (Jarausch, 1969, p. 59), later acknowledging that "we bear a share of the blame" (Jarausch, 1969, p. 76). At the conclusion of his memoirs, he admitted with unusual candor: "While I am certain that I did my utmost to confront this danger effectively, I am not blind to the inadequacy of my efforts" (Bethmann Hollweg, 1920, p. 166). This admission does not make him a partner in the strategic error so much as it embodies his inability to withstand structural forces beyond the capacity of any single individual to resist.

This study demonstrates that the mechanisms of civilian authority's erosion operated on three interconnected levels: the organized propaganda penetration represented by the "Voss Memorandum" and the publications of the far right under Haidebrand; the military-industrial alliance that constituted a pressure force the civilian establishment could not confront; and the Chancellor's inability to build a countervailing coalition despite exhausting every available instrument, including censorship, appeals, secret meetings, and even recourse to imperial authority (Mommsen, 1969, pp. 141–145). This reinforces the central thesis of the study: that the submarine warfare decision represented a triumph of institutional military logic over individual political rationality rather than a mere error of judgment.

As Jarausch's analysis demonstrated, the pattern of "calculated risk" that evolved into a "Leap into the Dark" occurred twice: in July 1914, leading to a world war, and in January 1917, leading to America's entry into the war and guaranteeing Germany's defeat (Jarausch, 1969, pp. 58–59, 75). The success of the Allied Powers depended upon the flow of supplies and troops from around the world through maritime routes, while Germany's failure to break British naval power was the principal cause of its collapse. Many military historians argue that all German army successes on the continent were nullified by the loss of the war at sea (Friedman, 2014).

On 15 July 1917, Bethmann Hollweg resigned, recognizing the impossibility of remaining in office in the face of opposition from an alliance of party leaders and the army high command. His fall represented the final acknowledgment of the triumph of adventurous military-populist logic over political rationality and reflected a structural illness within the Imperial German state: the absence of a balance of powers, the weakness of civilian institutions, and the dominance of military logic over political decision-making. A few days later, Schäfer, the National Liberal Reichstag representative and a close personal and political associate of the Chancellor, wrote in his diary: "The fall of Bethmann Hollweg is a catastrophe because of its timing, and a disgrace because of the manner in which it occurred" (Mommsen, 1969, p. 158).

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