

# EXCERPTS FROM A GERMAN CONFERENCE CONCERNING UNRESTRICTED SUBMARINE WARFARE

Pless Castle, 31 August 1916

**ADMIRAL V. HOLTZENDORFF:**

According to the general military situation, we are placed in a situation of defense; the continuation of the war on the part of our opponents is completely dependent upon England's attitude; it is therefore necessary for us to prevent England, by the use of all means in our power, from continuing to carry on the war, and the destruction of England's ocean commerce will accomplish this purpose; the last memorial of the Admiralty staff sets out plainly what the result of this destruction would be.

The reaction of the United States and the remaining neutral Powers is used as an argument against carrying on the unrestricted U-boat warfare; that in such case the entire shipping space of the world would be made available to England; that Russia's incapacity to carry out a third winter campaign and its necessity for peace are also arguments against the taking up of the U-boat war at an early date.

In the meanwhile, time is working against us; the blockade of Germany is becoming more and more oppressive; as the result of a good harvest we will be less dependent upon imports, and, speaking from the military standpoint, we can maintain an effective defensive.

So far as the neutrals are concerned, Holland will attack the first one to put foot upon her territory; the entrance of Denmark into the war is very improbable; England will not be able to gain in freight space; no freight space will be placed at its disposal by any action of the United States; nor is this likely to be the case with regard to the South American States, since they themselves are suffering from a shortage of tonnage; the tonnage of those of our ships which are in the possession of the enemy is negligible; it is within our power to break England's determination to carry on the war to the end of the year; to put off commencing the U-boat war would put off the results in question; in this connection the question must be well considered as to whether our allies will be able to hold out any longer; if we renounce the use of the U-boat weapon we may have reason to believe that this means *finis Germaniae*.

**SECRETARY OF STATE V. JAGOW:**

Unrestricted U-boat war would in any event mean the breaking of diplomatic relations with the United States, and, if American lives are lost, would finally lead to war; if the last neutral world Power were to take the side of the Entente, the smaller neutral States would be left with no choice other than to work with us or against us. [Here follow comments about the European neutral Powers.] If we take up unrestricted U-boat warfare, the attitude of all neutral Powers will be changed against us and we shall have to calculate upon establishing new fronts. Germany will in such case be looked upon as a mad dog against whom the hand of every man will be raised for the purpose of finally bringing about peace....

**SECRETARY OF STATE HELFFERICH:**

It is to be admitted that the situation both here and in England for launching a U-boat war is more favorable now than it was a year ago or in the spring, because at that time the mere blockade on the part of the neutrals would have been sufficient to starve us. Our harvest is notably better than it was last year, but at the same time we shall be pinched, and every importation would be welcome by us....

At the same time, we must always remember that the British supplies in the way of breadstuffs and the product of the new crop assure a capacity for maintenance for the period of from four to five months without any further importations. Moreover, we can not bank upon an immediate stoppage of the British ocean commerce, since only 5 per cent of the arriving ships are destroyed monthly... If the U-boat war should result in the British seamen being unwilling to go to sea on their own account, then maritime commerce could be organized on a military basis. It is on account of all these considerations that I am not persuaded that England can be actually downed.

The reactions of the U-boat war from the political and economic standpoint must not be underestimated. Everybody is perfectly convinced that a break with the United States and a war with the United States would be unavoidable. The assumption that the hostile attitude of the United States can not reach a higher pitch so far as we are concerned, is erroneous. Up to the present time, the Allies have received from the United States in the way of loans \$1,250,000,000. In the case of war, America will stand ready with all of its reserves available for the cause of the Allies, which will then become the cause of the United States. America will desire to win the war as quickly as possible and will summon all its energies for putting this wish into execution. Acting in cooperation with England, the very strongest kind of pressure can be exerted upon the neutral Powers to join the Entente. Since Denmark and Holland are dependent upon imports by water, they will be utterly unable to oppose it. We have no means of exerting pressure to avoid this result. Our need for iron is now so urgent that we are already at the point at which we can release no more. Holland can obtain from England, with limitations, whatever she needs in the way of coal. I see nothing but catastrophe following the application of the U-boat weapon at this time. A method which will lead us out of one serious situation only into the toils of another more serious, is not practical if we are not able to adopt counter-measures for the purpose of rendering the other disadvantageous result ineffectual.

**ADMIRAL V. CAPELLE:**

According to the course which the war has followed up to this time, I am convinced that we are not on the road to a peace acceptable to us if we continue along the lines pursued thus far. The conviction has now forced itself upon the Navy that nothing will lead to peace but the launching of an unrestricted U-boat war. If complete success were not to result from the U-boat war, this would not, in my opinion, lead to a catastrophe, but would, at the very worst, merely result in prolonging the war of exhaustion, just as the situation is at this time....

**IMPERIAL CHANCELOR V. BETHMANN-HOLLWEG:**

...If we combine the results of the statements made yesterday and today no one will doubt that we shall be able to rely upon the destruction of roughly speaking, 4 million tons of British shipping within from four to six months. The Admiralty Staff is of the opinion that England will then be ready to conclude peace. This opinion is considered by other gentlemen, for instance, by Secretary of State Helfferich, as of doubtful correctness, and nobody can prove that the hoped-for success will really come about. I, too, believe that this is merely an assumption. It is certain that a complete blockade from and to England can not be carried out, because U-boats can undertake nothing in the night time. We can lay down no iron ring around England, and, moreover, our blockade can be broken by the accompaniment of transports by war-ships. I have understood Admiral von Holtzendorff to say that intercourse to and from Holland and Denmark can be stopped. Will it be possible to do this if, at the same time, we are carrying on an intensive U-boat war against the English coast?

We must realize that the break with the United States will certainly follow the launching of the U-boat war. [Here follow comments concerning European neutral Powers. ]

I believe that a decision with regard to the launching of the U-boat war without an understanding with our allies is out of the question. We must calculate, in this connection, on the contingency that Turkey will be alienated from us. A successful stroke against Enver would be followed by a separate peace on the part of Turkey which it may conclude at any day. Nor can we involve Austria-Hungary in a war with the remaining neutral Powers without asking her opinion in the matter. If the Roumanian war were to turn out unfavorably for us, the U-boat war would avail us nothing; if Austria-Hungary falls to pieces, I do not know whether we shall be able to put up any further opposition. For these reasons, a final decision seems to me to be possible only after a clearing up of the military situation.