Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg Biography

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Biography

The German statesman and chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (1856-1921) led Germany during the first 3 years of World War I.

Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg was the son of a prominent commercial and agrarian family. After a rather routine rise in German political life, he became Prussian minister of the interior in 1905 and the imperial secretary of state for the interior in 1907. In 1909, after the fall of Bernhard von Bülow, he became imperial chancellor.

As a conservative of open mind and modern outlook, Bethmann Hollweg seemed a likely choice to heal divisions, such as the conflict between civilian and military, that were developing in Germany at that time. But in spite of some early achievements--such as the comprehensive social insurance law and liberal constitution for Alsace-Lorraine (both 1911)--he did not live not live up to expectations. His attempt to extend the franchise failed, and when Germany entered the war it had still not solved the problem of integrating the Social Democrats, the largest party in the Reichstag after the 1912 elections.

Diplomatically, Bethmann Hollweg inherited a situation as difficult as the domestic one, and he was no more successful on the international level. Germany was diplomatically isolated, and, worst of all, because of the naval race between Germany and England the relations of those two countries were deteriorating. When the British war secretary, Richard Haldane, came to Germany in 1912 on a diplomatic mission, Bethmann Hollweg was willing to be conciliatory. He was overruled, however, by Adm. Alfred von Tirpitz and the navy, which pushed through a new naval bill over Bethmann Hollweg's objections.

Although the chancellor sincerely tried to preserve peace in the summer of 1914, he was unable to control the military establishment's pressure for war. In any event, Bethmann Hollweg himself--with his "blank check" to Austria and his "scrap of paper" remark concerning Belgian neutrality--was partly responsible for the developing crisis. His wartime leadership was equally indecisive. He alienated the socialists and liberals by his apparent subservience to the military on questions of negotiated peace, annexations, and submarine warfare, and he alienated the right wing and the high command with his efforts in behalf of reform and civilian control of the military. In July 1917 Bethmann Hollweg was easily removed from office, and the establishment of a military dictatorship in Germany was virtually complete. He died in 1921.