



# 1917: Germany at the Crossroads

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## Abstract

In late 1916 Germany stood at the crossroads. Though it had withstood heavy attacks by the Allies and won an unexpected victory over a new enemy, Romania, it was clear that Germany could not win a war without end. As a result, Germany offered a compromise peace. Whether this offer was genuine is still debated by historians. When the offer was rejected by the Allies, Germany unleashed a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare, hoping to force Britain upon its knees within six months. Though this hope was not realised, the collapse of the Tsarist empire offered a new opportunity to win the war. However, the Russian Revolution coincided with increasing social and political unrest and demands for peace at home. Though Germany forced the new Bolshevik government to sign a harsh peace treaty in early 1918, it was an open question whether Germany would eventually win the war against the Allies in the West. When the German Spring Offensive, started on 21 March 1918 failed, final defeat was only a matter of time.

## Keywords

collapse of the Russian empire; domestic unrest; final defeat; peace offer; unrestricted submarine warfare; US entry into the war

After the murderous battles of 1916 and the expansion of the war in southern Europe in connection with Romania's entry into the war alongside the Allies, Germany was indeed at a crossroads in late 1916/early 1917. What was to happen now? There were no signs of victory and the country's resources dwindled—both in personnel and material. At the same time, discontent increased. The following article focuses on these aspects.

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Following these costly campaigns but also encouraged by the speedy victory over Romania, the German government unexpectedly decided in late 1916 to explore options for negotiations to end the war. On 12 December 1916, the Chancellor of the German empire, Bethmann Hollweg, once again addressed the plenum of the Reichstag after a lengthy break. He proudly looked back on the closing year of war praising 'the gigantic horse of the nation' and the firm decision of the German empire and its allies to continue the fight: 'Always ready to defend ourselves and fight for our nation's existence, for its free future and always ready for this price to stretch out our hand for peace'.<sup>1</sup> Just by mentioning the word

'peace' he was applauded from the Left. When he did make a peace offer in the further course of this session—which lasted but twenty minutes—the house was in an uproar. 'Conscious of their military and economic strength and ready to carry on to the end, if they must, the struggle that is forced upon them, but animated at the same time by the desire to stem the flood of blood and to bring the horrors of war to an end, the four allied powers propose to enter even now into peace negotiations'.<sup>2</sup>

After more than two years of war, this was an astonishing offer. In 1914/1915 the imperial government had explored through various channels whether it would be possible to remove Russia from the alliance of opponents. But these attempts failed due to the tsar's loyalty to his allies. The war therefore increasingly turned into brutal slaughter. Attempts by both the Germans and the Allies to end the standstill with large-scale offensives in the course of 1916 and bring about a victory had failed at Verdun, on the Somme, and in the East. The losses among soldiers—i.e., killed or wounded in action or taken prisoner—during these three offensives alone amounted to approximately 3.6 million. From the German perspective, the further increase in the number of enemies was devastating. On the assumption

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1 Speech by Bethmann Hollweg in Parliament, 12 December 1916, accessed 30 September 2019, [https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt\\_k13\\_bsb00003404\\_00762.html](https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt_k13_bsb00003404_00762.html).

2 *Ibid.*

that the Central powers were headed towards collapse, given the failure near Verdun and the Allied offensives, Romania also had joined the war alongside the Allies.

This hope had been premature, however, and Romania had to pay a heavy price for its declaration of war. Following a quick campaign, the Central powers occupied the country and entered Bucharest in early December. They celebrated this victory with a festive parade and a memorial service.

In contrast to the ‘peace resolution’ of the Reichstag of 1917, the present offer by the chancellor of the German empire is little known. This is not least due to the controversial opinions as to its importance. For many this was, and still is, a not very straightforward attempt to legitimise the unrestricted submarine warfare demanded by the Supreme Army Command (OHL) and other agitators in the event that the Allies rejected the German offer, which was to be expected under the existing circumstances. The tenor of the speech, the lack of specific offers as well as the last paragraph of the note read by the chancellor, seem to confirm this view at first glance: ‘If, in spite of this offer of peace and reconciliation, the struggle should go on, the four allied powers are resolved to continue to a victorious end, but they solemnly disclaim responsibility for this before humanity and history’.<sup>3</sup> But does this view do justice to the importance of the note? No doubt: the victory over Romania, which symbolised strength after all the losses, motivated the peace offer. And the German empire had taken some pressure off itself. The simultaneous consultations about the Hindenburg programme made it clear that much greater efforts were necessary to achieve a victory. Another motive was the all too obvious deteriorating situation within the country. The increasing war-weariness and rising poverty were unmissable. Protests and strikes had increased. The fortress truce (Burgfrieden) intended as a sign of internal strength was in danger of collapsing completely under the wild war aim demands from the Right, which questioned the myth of a defensive war on the one hand, and the infinite stubbornness displayed by the old elites in blocking any efforts at domestic reforms. In addition, the government of the German empire made this proposal not only to indicate to war-weary countries on the side of the Entente, like Russia, a readiness to negotiate and thus break up this alliance; above all it wanted to undermine an imminent American peace initiative.

After having been reelected president of the United States in early November 1916, Woodrow Wilson wanted to invite all warring powers to a peace conference. Unlike the chancellor of the German empire, Wilson intended to ask all warring states to declare their war aims. But this was exactly what the German government was unable or unwilling to do. Therefore, due to contradicting interests, the allies were not at all in agreement on what

to demand. But of greater importance was the question of the future of Belgium. The Supreme Army Command and the Imperial Navy were—supported by increasingly loud right-wing politicians—not at all ready to make any concessions. On the contrary, prior to the speech of the chancellor, they had once again informed him of their far-reaching war aims in writing. For the Allies as well as for the neutral states, above all, the United States, the unrestricted reconstruction and independence of Belgium were more than just a symbolic *conditio sine qua non*. When the chancellor did not address this question in his speech, his offer lost a lot of its credibility.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to impute a tactically dishonest manoeuvre to Bethmann Hollweg from the outset. His ‘Janus-faced character’ was certainly a problem, but it would also not do to disregard the difficulties that confronted him, although, even the Left in the Reichstag were rejoicing. The diary entry of a naval officer about the reactions at the front after reading the peace offer speaks volumes: ‘All were down and looked askance at the matter. If the Chancellor who seems to be the originator of the matter ... had not always done the wrong thing, one would have trusted but as things are I believe nobody has any trust. The speech of the Chancellor of the German Empire ... and the note are nothing but the usual claptrap of old women about God, humanity, blood etc. as if it were not the most Christian and most caring for his people who completely shattered his enemy’.<sup>4</sup> Against this backdrop the chancellor was unable to tell either how serious the situation really was or which objectives the German empire eventually pursued. The first would only have encouraged the Allies to fight to victory themselves despite their own increasing problems given a weakened enemy. The latter would have caused the German Right to turn against him and rendered any compromise in negotiations impossible from the outset.

Due to lack of sources we will probably never know what the chancellor had really thought. If he had hoped that on the enemy’s side there could also be forces that in view of the general exhaustion were ready to take up the thread, and that the negotiations would then somehow take their course, this would have been an honourable approach from a moral point of view but mere speculation politically. What he can be reproached for, however, is that with his overhasty action he had basically torpedoed the forthcoming American offer of mediation. When President Wilson—despite the German action—requested all warring parties on 18 December to state their objectives, he ultimately came off empty-handed. With reference to his own initiative, the chancellor at first declined to reply instead of using the opportunity to force the hand of the Entente and at the same time gain ground with neutral and war-weary states. Like the Germans, the Entente would have had to show its colours

3 *Ibid.*

4 Letter of Vice Admiral Albert Hopman to his wife, 12 December 1916, ‘Albert Hopman, Das ereignisreiche Leben eines “Wilhelminers”’. Tagebücher, Briefe Aufzeichnungen, ed. Michael Epkenhans, München 2004, 937.

regarding its noble motives of defending democracy, national autonomy, and expansionist ambitions if it did not want to assume the odium of the prolonger of the war. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of the spring of 1916, which partitioned the Middle East, was in this respect only an example of the inconsistency of their own actions.

The German offer as well as Wilson's attempt failed, therefore, within a few weeks. Wilson's offer was unacceptable to the imperial government as it feared that it would thus have to give up its war aims. The Allies, in turn, made it clear that a peace agreement would be impossible unless there was a guarantee for the reestablishment of the infringed rights and freedoms, for the recognition of the nationality principle and the free existence of small states. The positions could hardly be more irreconcilable.

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The failure of the peace offer caused the imperial government to stake everything on one card. The explanations of an order by Kaiser Wilhelm II of 9 January 1917 read: 'From February 1, 1917 onward, every enemy merchantman met within the restricted zone is to be attacked without warning'. Although the sinking of enemy merchant ships might be somehow understandable, this did not apply to the subsequent provision that after a transitional period of fourteen days, neutral ships were also to be sunk without warning. The logic was that no ship that could be of use to the enemy should be able to reach the latter's ports. After the land war had already assumed a new quality of brutality with the use of poison gas in 1915, this was now also true for the war at sea. The previous practice of stopping merchant ships, searching them for contraband, and, depending on the result, either letting them go or sinking them after saving their crews—at least in theory—was well and truly over.

Although there had already been submarine warfare against the Allies in 1915/16, after several incidents where American citizens had been injured or lost their lives, it was discontinued. This was also true for the submarine warfare according to the Prize Regulations. The new commander-in-chief of the High Seas Fleet, Admiral Scheer, refused to subject his commanders to the risk of being sunk by the numerous armed merchant ships and decoy vessels.

The chancellor of the German empire was the driving force behind the prevention of unrestricted submarine warfare. In view of the increasingly difficult war situation, he wanted to avoid the United States' entry into the war. He was supported by the new Supreme Army Command under Chief of the General Staff Paul von Hindenburg, and Quartermaster General Erich Ludendorff. After the casualty-intensive offensives near Verdun, on the Somme, and in the East as well as Romania's entry into the war in August 1916, they had little interest in a further increase in the number of enemies.

The stabilisation of the fronts and the rapid victory over Romania in early December 1916 changed the field of force, however. The German empire would hardly be able to withstand another such year of war. This was even more true as the effects of the blockade became increasingly obvious. Scarcity of food and substitutes characterised everyday life. An increasing war-weariness and open protests against the war went along with this. But the chancellor also faced a lot of headwind from another side. Seconded by the navy, there were an increasing number of people who demanded ruthless submarine warfare to end the war victoriously. The prospect of ending the war within a few weeks(!)—as grand admiral and secretary of state of the German Imperial Naval Office, Alfred von Tirpitz said in early 1915—or five months victoriously was simply too tempting. A memorandum of late January 1917 written by an adviser to the navy for their own self-assurance suggested:

The consequences of ruthlessly executed submarine warfare will be so terrible for England that it cannot subject itself to it. By assuming a possibility that they may enter, and continuing to fight England would play vabanque. If we begin again a ruthless submarine warfare, it will, in view of the previous experiences, at first doubt that we will persevere. But if it realises that against all odds we are able and willing each month to ruthlessly bring a number of tons to the bottom of the sea that is greater than the number of new tons it is able to produce, it will give in. And it must and will give in at all costs; the relinquishment of valuable colonies, payment of billions of reparations, declaration of full disinterest in the European continent are a trifle for England compared to the consequences of a lost submarine warfare.<sup>5</sup>

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With the beginning of unrestricted submarine warfare, the United States' entry into the war was only a question of when and not if. But this was of no real interest. Most parties in the Reichstag were glad that after the lengthy debate back and forth in previous years, a decision was finally made. Like the imperial government, many believed that this would really bring the end of the war nearer and also counteract the rising poverty in the country.

The first reports about the successes of the submarines gave the impression that the all or nothing strategy of politicians and military would work out. Within a few weeks, hundreds of thousands of Gross Registered Tonnage (GRT) of enemy and neutral merchant ships sank in the depths of the North Sea and the Atlantic: whereas in February 'only' 499,000 GRT were sunk, in March the figure was already 600,000 and in April had risen to 841,000 GRT. In early May, the chief of the naval staff declared in a briefing to the emperor that 'it is impossible

5 Memo by Dr Richard Fuß on submarine warfare, 30 January 1917, cited *ibid*, 955–956.

that England could cope with such an immense loss. For him ‘victory’ was therefore just a matter of time.<sup>6</sup>

But it was not only in relation to England, the nemesis of the German empire with its inexhaustible resources in the dominions and colonies, that the empire seemed to be on the road to victory. The Tsarist empire also suddenly faced collapse which had not been expected. Defeat, hunger, and social protest combined into a mixture which exploded in March 1917. The old order collapsed within a few days. The tsar, the hated symbol of oppression abdicated and made room for a bourgeois government. Although they were ready to introduce reforms in the country, it was not clear whether they would give up the war for lost. But this is what the radical left forces did who assembled around the Petrograd Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils and made much further-reaching demands in a first manifesto published in late March.

From the perspective of the imperial government, further radicalisation in Russia was welcome. Finally, it seemed to happen what they had tried in vain in 1914/1915 when the general staff had used a lot of money to try to incite the peoples of the gigantic empire to rise against the tsar with little success. The Russian steamroller, of which they had all been so afraid, had obviously run against a wall through its own fault. To accelerate the final collapse, the imperial government smuggled the leader of the Bolsheviks, Vladimir I. Lenin, in a secret action into Russia from his Swiss exile where he had led an increasingly bleak existence. A year later it would turn out to be a bitter irony of fate that their actions had hastened their own downfall.

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Against this backdrop, the imperial government was not afraid of the United States entering the war. Quite the opposite: Contrary to certain expectations, the severance of diplomatic relations after the beginning of unrestricted submarine warfare on 3 February did by no means result in a declaration of war. In November 1916 Wilson had won the election not least because of his promise to keep the United States out of the war. Even after the initiation of unrestricted submarine warfare, there was no appetite for war. This was what the imperial government banked on, and some leading officials interpreted the fact that although the United States government had severed diplomatic relations with the German empire they did not do so with its Austro-Hungarian ally as an encouraging sign.

Initially, Wilson had armed only American merchant steamers setting out for Europe. The hope that those as well as passenger ships would be spared by the submarines did not come true. In March alone, five ships

sank in the restricted submarine area within one week. Unlike in the years before, the imperial government—trusting in the boastful promises of the naval staff and their own power—was no longer interested in making concessions to the United States and thus risking domestic conflicts: ‘Now once and for all, an end to negotiations with America. If Wilson wants war, let him make it, and let him then have it’ read a directive of the emperor to the Foreign Office of 18 March.<sup>7</sup>

Should there have been any chance to avoid war with United States, it was over with the Zimmermann telegram. This was probably one of the most foolish dispatches in the history of war. As early as mid-January—that is, before unrestricted submarine warfare was declared—State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Zimmermann had asked the German envoy to Mexico to offer the Mexican government an alliance in the event of America entering the war. If this happened, Zimmermann stated, the German empire would support Mexico to regain the territories it had lost to the United States in the nineteenth century. This was not about small border areas but federal states such as California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, i.e., core areas of the big neighbour. The trouble was that British intelligence had deciphered this telegram and leaked it to the United States to get them into war alongside the Allies. When they used it in early March, the atmosphere in the country changed. The ‘subtleties’, i.e., the fact that German support would only be granted in the event of an entry into the war, were deliberately overlooked. President Wilson carefully prepared the United States’ entry into the war.

In his famous address to Congress on 2 April he pressed every button: ‘The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind. It is a war against all nations’, he declared. ‘Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion’.<sup>8</sup>

But Wilson addressed not only his own people but also the population in the German empire: ‘We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling towards them but one of sympathy and friendship. It was not upon their impulse that their Government acted in entering this war. It was not with their previous knowledge or approval. It was a war determined upon as wars used to be determined upon in the old, unhappy days when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers and wars were provoked and waged in the interest of dynasties or of little groups of ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellow men as pawns and tools’.<sup>9</sup>

Towards the end the sentence was uttered which was to become the American mission in the twentieth century:

6 Report by the Chief of the Admiral Staff, Grand Admiral v. Holtzendorff, to the Emperor, 4 May 1917, cited in: *Die deutsche Seekriegsleitung im Ersten Weltkrieg*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Granier, Koblenz 2000, 549–550.

7 Wilhelm II to Foreign Office, 18 March 1917, cited in: Joachim Schröder, *Die U-Boote des Kaisers. Die Geschichte des deutschen U-Boot-Krieges gegen Großbritannien im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Lauf an der Pegnitz 2000, 322.

8 Speech by President Wilson to Congress, 6 April 1917, accessed 30 September 2019, [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson%27s\\_War\\_Message\\_to\\_Congress](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson%27s_War_Message_to_Congress).

9 *Ibid.*

‘The world must be made safe for democracy’.<sup>10</sup> The speech was received with great cheer, and on 6 April the declaration of war followed. The German empire received the declaration of war with surprising calmness. Many hoped that the war would be over when the US would be able to effectively intervene after long preparations.

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The willingness of the imperial government and the Supreme Army Command to stake everything on one card, neglected that the situation had escalated not only on the fronts but also within the country. The winter of 1917 had been extremely long and harsh. Throughout the empire people had starved and been cold. They increasingly vented their displeasure through demonstrations and strikes. The final split of the Social Democratic Party in April was also an unmistakable sign that the fortress truce of the summer of 1914 had become increasingly fragile.

Against this backdrop the vague promise of reforming the symbol of the old state of subjects, i.e., the Prussian three-class franchise system, was no longer enough to calm the domestic situation and neither was the appointment of a constitutional affairs committee to discuss a reform of the imperial constitution. The people wanted real changes. And above all, they wanted peace. The formula of the Russian revolutionaries of ‘peace without annexations and contributions’ seemed to offer a way which more and more people deemed desirable.

This crisis worsened dramatically when it changed from latent to highly explosive in the top leadership. The Supreme Army Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff used the general discontent to get rid of the chancellor. In their opinion, he was not the man to end a war—in which everything was at stake—as victor. With his everlasting concerns, his pessimism, and his indecision he increasingly grated on the nerves of the military. But strong nerves were required in view of a possible new winter of war. Furthermore, nobody knew how to explain the failure of the submarine warfare to the public. The 30th of June, the date the navy had predicted, came and went without the empire being one step nearer to victory.

While the military wanted to get rid of the chancellor, because, from their point of view he was in the way of a victorious peace, the majority in the Reichstag had completely different objectives. Under the impression of the enormous losses and the heated atmosphere within the country after the Russian revolution, they wanted to end the war before it was really too late. In July 1917, representatives of the parties attacked the chancellor with unexpected sharpness and demanded a decided move towards peace.

The general impression was that overnight the Reichstag seemed to reach for power. The previous majority in favour of a victorious peace to the right of the Social Democrats turned into a peace- and reform-ready majority to the right of the stubborn conservatives. The formation of the so-called Interfactional Committee, which consisted of representatives from all parties except for the Conservatives and the Independent Social Democrats, was a sign that the Reichstag did not only want to debate but really wanted to act. Within a few days this majority would—together with the German Supreme Command OHL—contribute to the overthrow of the unpopular chancellor.

While the OHL and Reichstag majority were happy about the removal of the chancellor, they were very disappointed with his successor, the rather unknown previous undersecretary of state in the Prussian ministry of economics, Georg Michaelis. The OHL, which the Reichstag majority also had wanted to put in their place, had prevailed and made it clear who ruled the roost.

The Reichstag majority accepted this decision without complaint. They were convinced that their impetus would be enough to make progress in the question of peace and in the domestic reform. Representatives of the parties made all possible efforts to achieve a peace resolution. After several days of negotiation, an agreement was reached; however, this was not supported by the national liberals, not to mention the conservatives.

On 19 July, the Reichstag passed a resolution, which at first glance was progress after all the war aim programmes; nevertheless, it left many questions open. ‘The Reichstag strives for a peace of understanding, for durable reconciliation among the peoples of the world’ it stated amid general approval of the majority.<sup>11</sup> But already the next sentence was not a clear commitment to peace without annexation and contributions. Instead it read: ‘Territorial acquisitions achieved by force and violations of political, economic, or financial integrity are incompatible with such a peace’.<sup>12</sup> Although this was a rejection of the war aim catalogues, which had been compiled by industrialists, bankers, and pan-Germans, the wording deliberately allowed for a ‘voluntary accession’ of occupied territories or the ‘securing of the border protection’ through ‘local displacements’.<sup>13</sup> In this manner, the left liberal Conrad Haußmann had attempted to refute the objections of the military against the resolution in the preliminary talks. But above all, there was no mention of Belgium, an extremely sensitive point especially for the neutral states, or of Poland, which had been an independent state from the German empire and its ally Austria-Hungary since late 1916, despite all declarations.

The other paragraphs are dedicated to the freedom

10 *Ibid.*

11 Protocol of Proceedings of Parliament, 19 July 1917, accessed 30 September 2019, [https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt\\_k13\\_bsb00003406\\_00478.html](https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt_k13_bsb00003406_00478.html).

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

of the seas, demanded ‘economic peace’ or the ‘creation of international legal organisations’. To avoid any misunderstanding about too much readiness for concession, the resolution concluded with sharp words: ‘As long, however, as enemy governments do not agree to such a peace, as long as they threaten Germany and its allies with territorial conquests and violations, the German people will stand together as one man, persevere unshakably, and fight on until its right and the right of its allies to life and free development is guaranteed’.<sup>14</sup> These objectives were not realistic. At the session, the new chancellor made it clear that he did not even think of being guided by their spirit. His response to the Papal peace note a short time later made it clear to all the world that the imperial government was not ready to curtail its war aim demands.

It cannot be overlooked, however, that the peace note—as well-intended as it was—increased the polarisation within the country. It was the trigger for the foundation of the German Fatherland Party on 2 September, the symbolic Sedan Day in the equally symbolic city of Königsberg. Here, in the heart of old Prussia, where its kings had been crowned in former times, the new right gathered to openly demonstrate that it did not even think about compromising on either domestic or foreign issues. On the contrary, for them it was the starting point for a ruthless campaign against all supporters of a ‘Scheidemann peace’, which would betray the empire to its enemy, as was maliciously stated. This campaign foreshadowed the severity of their opposition in the event they would be able to prevail.

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The collapse of Russia after a failed new offensive and a second revolution in November 1917 gave new hope to the proponents of a victorious peace. Despite the heavy losses in the murderous battles of Flanders, the empire appeared to be better off than before. Finally, it was able to focus on one enemy only, at least according to the military officials in charge. Although several army leaders warned against the risks of a large-scale offensive, Ludendorff prevailed with his plan for a decisive battle in the spring of 1918. This military offensive was the only way to bring about the ‘victorious peace’ that temporarily had seemed impossible. This ‘victorious peace’ was an indispensable requirement for the realisation of their annexationist war aim programme. The same was true for domestic policy: A ‘victorious peace’ was the only way to maintain the traditional conservative order of which the leading military considered themselves the guarantors.

Despite the success in Russia, the reality was different. When the offensive eventually failed despite several attempts, defeat was unavoidable. At the same time, the German empire collapsed. Against this backdrop, 1917 was indeed a year where Germany had been at the crossroads. Instead of looking for peace and paving the way for reforms in the country, the imperial government and the military leadership had decided in favour of an all or nothing strategy. A year later, they had to pay the price for it.

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14 *Ibid.*