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The Details

[How it Began](#)
[Battlefield Tours](#)
[Battles](#)
[Encyclopedia](#)
[Source Documents](#)
[Special Features](#)
[Timeline](#)
[War in the Air](#)
[Weaponry](#)
[Who's Who](#)

Multimedia

[Battlefields Today](#)
[Maps](#)
[Propaganda Posters](#)
[Vintage Audio and Video](#)
[Vintage Photographs](#)

Narratives

[Memoirs and Diaries](#)

Primary Documents - Count Georg von Hertling on President Wilson's Addendum to the Fourteen Points, 25 February 1918

Reproduced below is the text of a speech given by German Chancellor Count Georg von Hertling to the German Reichstag on 25 February 1918. In his address to the Reichstag Count Hertling addressed himself to a speech given by Woodrow Wilson to the U.S. Congress on 11 February in which the U.S. President expanded upon his earlier Fourteen Points speech of 8 January 1918. In his new address Wilson had set out the terms upon which belligerent nations were to discuss any potential peace settlement.

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Count Hertling, expanding upon his own earlier speech to the Reichstag on 24 January 1918, again welcomed Wilson's Fourteen Points initiative. He also claimed to be largely in concurrence with the principles behind Wilson's latest speech.

Hertling nonetheless berated the Entente Powers for hypocrisy, arguing that Britain (to take one example) found herself in contravention of many of Wilson's key principles. Given this, Count Hertling found it unreasonable that American criticism should be levelled exclusively at the Central Powers.

Click [here](#) to read British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour's reaction to Hertling's speech. Click [here](#) to read Belgian Prime Minister Charles de

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[1915](#)
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[1917](#)
[1918](#)
[1919](#)
[Post-1919](#)

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Broqueville's views regarding any peace settlement.

Count Hertling's Speech to the Reichstag in Response to Woodrow Wilson's 11 February Speech to U.S. Congress, 25 February 1918

I entertain certain doubts as to the utility and success of dialogues carried on by Ministers and statesmen of belligerent countries.

Mr. Runciman in the House of Commons recently expressed the opinion that we would get much nearer peace if responsible representatives of the belligerent powers would come together in an intimate meeting for discussion.

I can only agree with him that that would be the way to remove numerous intentional and unintentional misunderstandings and compel our enemies to take our words as they are meant, and on their part also to show their colours.

I cannot at any rate discover that the words which I spoke here on two occasions were received in hostile countries objectively and without prejudice. Moreover, discussion in an intimate gathering alone could lead to understanding on many individual questions which can really be settled only by compromise.

It has been repeatedly said that we do not contemplate retaining Belgium, but that we must be safeguarded from the danger of a country with which we desire after the war to live in peace and friendship becoming the object or the jumping-off ground of enemy machinations.

If, therefore, a proposal came from the opposing side - for example, from the Government in Havre - we should not adopt an antagonistic attitude, even though the discussion at first might only be unbinding.

Meanwhile it does not appear as if Mr. Runciman's suggestion has a chance of assuming tangible shape, and I must adhere to the existing methods of dialogue across the Channel and ocean.

Adopting this method, I readily admit that President Wilson's message of February 11th represents, perhaps, a small step toward a mutual rapprochement. I therefore pass over the preliminary and excessively long declarations in order to address myself immediately to the four principles which, in President Wilson's opinion, must be applied in a mutual exchange of views.

The first clause says that each part of the final settlement must be based upon the essential justice of that particular case and upon such adjustments as are most likely to bring a peace that will be permanent.

Who would contradict this? The phrase, coined by the great father of the Church, Augustine, 1,500 years ago - "*justitia fundamentum regnorum*," - is still valid today. Certain it is that only peace based in all its parts on the principles of justice has a prospect of endurance.

The second clause expresses the desire that peoples and provinces shall not be bartered about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were mere chattels and pawns in a game, even the

great game, now forever discredited, of the balance of power.

This clause, too, can be unconditionally assented to. Indeed, one wonders that the President of the United States considered it necessary to emphasize it anew. This clause contains a polemic against conditions long vanished, views against Cabinet politics and Cabinet wars, against mixing State territory and princely and private property, which belong to a past that is far behind us.

I do not want to be discourteous, but when one remembers the earlier utterances of President Wilson, one might think that he is labouring under the illusion that there exists in Germany an antagonism between an autocratic Government and a mass of people without rights.

And yet President Wilson knows (as, at any rate, the German edition of his book on the State proves) German political literature, and he knows, therefore, that with us Princes and Governments are the highest members of the nation as a whole, organized in the form of a State, the highest members, with whom the final decision lies.

But, seeing that they also, as the supreme organs, belong to the whole, decision is of such a nature that only the welfare of the whole is the guiding line for a decision to be taken. It may be useful to point this out expressly to President Wilson's countrymen.

Then finally at the close of the second clause the game of the balance of power is declared to be forever discredited. We, too, can only gladly applaud. As is well known, it was England which invented the principle of the maintenance of the balance of power in order especially to apply it when one of the States on the European Continent threatened to become too powerful for her. It was only another expression for England's domination.

The third clause, according to which every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned, and not as part of any mere adjustment or compromise of claims among rival States, is the only application of the foregoing in a definite direction, or a deduction from it, and is therefore included in the assent given to that clause.

Now, in the fourth clause he demands that all well-defined national aspirations shall be accorded the utmost satisfaction that can be accorded them without introducing new or perpetuating old elements of discord and antagonism that would be likely in time to break the peace of Europe, and consequently of the world.

Here, also, I can give assent in principle, and I declare, therefore, with President Wilson, that a general peace on such a basis is discussable.

Only one reservation is to be made. These principles must not be proposed by the President of the United States alone, but they must also be recognized definitely by all States and nations. President Wilson, who reproaches the German Chancellor with a certain amount of backwardness, seems to me in his flight of ideas to have hurried far in advance of existing realities.

Certainly a League of Nations, erected upon justice and mutual unselfish appreciation, a condition of humanity in which war, together with all that remains of the earliest barbarism, should have completely disappeared and in which there should be no bloody sacrifices, no self-mutilation of peoples, no destruction of laboriously acquired cultural values - that would be an aim devoutly to be desired.

But that aim has not yet been reached. There does not yet exist a court of arbitration set up by all nations for the safeguarding of peace in the name of justice. When President Wilson incidentally says that the German Chancellor is speaking to the court of the entire world, I must, as things stand today, in the name of the German Empire and her allies, decline this court as prejudiced, joyfully as I would greet it if an impartial court of arbitration existed and gladly as I would cooperate to realize such ideals.

Unfortunately, however, there is no trace of a similar state of mind on the part of the leading powers in the Entente. England's war aims, as recently expressed in Lloyd George's speeches, are still thoroughly imperialistic and want to impose on the world a peace according to England's good pleasure.

When England talks about peoples' right of self-determination, she does not think of applying the principle to Ireland, Egypt, or India.

Our war aims from the beginning were the defence of the Fatherland, the maintenance of our territorial integrity, and the freedom of our economic development. Our warfare, even where it must be aggressive in action, is defensive in aim.

I lay especial stress upon that just now in order that no misunderstandings shall arise about our operations in the east.

After the breaking off of peace negotiations by the Russian delegation on February 10th we had a free hand as against Russia. The sole aim of the advance of our troops, which was begun seven days after the rupture, was to safeguard the fruits of our peace with Ukraine.

Aims of conquest were in no way a determining factor. We were strengthened in this by the Ukrainians' appeal for support in bringing about order in their young State against the disturbances carried out by the Bolsheviki.

If further military operations in other regions have taken place, the same applies to them. They in no way aim at conquest. They are solely taking place at the urgent appeals and representations of the populations for protection against atrocities and devastation by Red Guards and other bands.

They have, therefore, been undertaken in the name of humanity. They are measures of assistance and have no other character. It is a question of creating peace and order in the interest of peaceable populations.

We do not intend to establish ourselves, for example, in Esthonia or Livonia. In Courland and Lithuania our chief object is to create organs of self-determination and self-administration. Our

military action, however, has produced a success far exceeding the original aim.

News was received yesterday that Petrograd had accepted our conditions and had sent its representatives to Brest-Litovsk for further negotiations. Accordingly, our delegates travelled thither last evening.

It is possible that there will still be dispute about the details, but the main thing has been achieved. The will to peace has been expressly announced from the Russian side, while the conditions have been accepted and the conclusion of peace must ensue within a very short time.

To safeguard the fruits of our peace with Ukraine, our army command drew the sword. Peace with Russia will be the happy result.

Peace negotiations with Rumania began at Bucharest yesterday. It appeared necessary that Secretary von Kuhlmann should be present there during the first days when the foundations were laid. Now, however, he will presumably soon go to Brest-Litovsk.

It is to be remembered regarding negotiations with Rumania that we are not taking part in them alone, and are under obligation to champion the interests of our allies, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey, and to see to it that a compromise is arranged there regarding any divergent desires that will possibly give rise to difficulties, but these difficulties will be overcome.

With regard to Rumania, too, the guiding principle will be that we must, and desired to, convert into friends the States with which on the basis of the success of our army we now conclude peace.

I will say a word regarding Poland, in behalf of which the Entente and President Wilson have recently appeared specially to interest themselves, as a country liberated from oppressive independence of Tsarist Russia by the united forces of Germany and Austria-Hungary, for the purpose of establishing an independent State, which, in unrestricted development of its national culture, shall at the same time become a pillar of peace in Europe.

The constitutional problem - in the narrower sense the question what constitution the new State shall receive - could not, as is easily understood, be immediately decided, and is still in the stage of exhaustive discussions between the three countries concerned.

A fresh difficulty has been added to the many difficulties which have in this connection to be overcome, difficulties especially in the economic domain in consequence of the collapse of old Russia. This difficulty results from the delimitation of the frontier between the new State and adjacent Russian territory.

For this reason the news of peace with the Ukraine at first evoked great uneasiness in Poland. I hope, however, that with goodwill and proper regard to the ethnographical conditions a compromise on the claims will be reached. The announced intention to make a serious attempt in this direction has greatly calmed Polish circles.

In the regulation of the frontier question only what is indispensable on military grounds will be demanded on Germany's part.

The Entente is fighting for the acquisition of portions of Austro-Hungarian territory by Italy and for the severance of Palestine, Syria, and Arabia from the Turkish Empire.

England has particularly cast an eye on portions of Turkish territory. She has suddenly discovered an affection for the Arabians and she hopes by utilizing the Arabians to annex fresh territories to the British Empire, perhaps by the creation of a protectorate dependent upon British domination.

That the colonial wars of England are directed at increasing and rounding out the enormous British possessions, particularly in Africa, has been repeatedly stated by British statesmen.

In the face of this policy Entente statesmen dare to represent Germany as the disturber of peace, who, in the interest of world peace, must be confined within the narrowest bounds.

By a system of lies and calumny they endeavour to instigate their own people and neutral countries against the Central Powers and to disturb neutral countries with the spectre of the violation of neutrality by Germany.

Regarding the intrigues recently carried on in Switzerland we never thought, nor will we think, of assailing Swiss neutrality. We are much indebted to Switzerland. We express gratitude to her, Holland, the Scandinavian countries, and Spain, which by her geographical position is exposed to especial difficulties, and no less to the extra-European countries which have not entered the war, for their manly attitude in that, despite all temptations and oppressions, they preserve their neutrality.

The world yearns for peace and desires nothing more than that the sufferings of war under which it groans should come to an end. But the Governments of the enemy States contrive ever anew to stir the war fury among their peoples.

Our people will hold out further, but the blood of the fallen, the agonies of the mutilated and the distress and sufferings of the peoples will fall on the heads of those who insistently refuse to listen to the voice of reason and humanity.

Source: *Source Records of the Great War, Vol. VI*, ed. Charles F. Horne, *National Alumni 1923*

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