

## Major Freiherr von der Bussche's Address to the Reichstag of the Recommendations of the German High Command *2 October 1918*

Coming to the conclusion that the war could not be won, the German High Command made the following recommendation for peace to the Reichstag on October 2, 1918.

In a few days the situation has fundamentally changed.

The collapse of the Bulgarian front has entirely upset our disposition of troops. Our communications with Constantinople were threatened, as well as the shipping route indispensable for the transport of our supplies on the Danube.

We were compelled, if we were not to leave the Entente a free hand in the Balkans, to send German and Austro-Hungarian divisions earmarked for the Western front to those regions, abandoning the Black Sea and Rumania.

We were obliged to make an immediate decision. The entrainment of our troops had already begun. We have every justification for hoping that the situation in the Balkans may be re-established, at all events sufficiently to guard our own interests. Unfortunately, as I shall explain, this cannot be done without great detriment to the situation as a whole.

Almost simultaneously with the offensive in Macedonia, violent enemy attacks have been made in the West. They have not found us unprepared. All possible measures have been taken to hold them up. Divisions from the East were on the way to relieve the sorely tried divisions in the West.

Unfortunately a portion of these troops had to be diverted to the Balkans. The last men capable of bearing arms had been withdrawn from the East. We calmly awaited the decisive battle. The Entente knew how to conceal from us where the attacks would take place. From the sea to Switzerland preparations for the attack were in progress.

The most extensive was against Lorraine and the Sundgau, and we were forced to distribute our reserves and to keep the whole front in a state of readiness for the attack. Considerable forces had to be stationed, especially in Lorraine and in the Sundgau, for the defence of German territory.

After carrying out the necessary movements, we were absolutely convinced that we should emerge victorious from the coming battles, and that we should be able to break the opposition of our enemies by the enormous losses which we anticipated they would suffer. Consequently, by putting in reserves at the right time, we have been able to hold up the enemy at all those places where, by means of tanks, by surprise attacks or superiority in numbers, he has penetrated our lines.

The fighting of the last six days may be termed successful for us, in spite of the loss of prisoners and material.

In comparison with our successes in the spring offensive the enemy has made little progress. In the majority of cases his continuous onslaughts have been countered with unusual obstinacy on the part of our troops. According to our own reports the enemy has suffered the heaviest losses.

The majority of our troops have fought splendidly and made superhuman efforts. Their old brave spirit has not died out. The numerical superiority of the enemy has not been able to terrorize our men. Officers and men vie with each other in deeds of valour.

In spite of these facts, the High Command has been compelled to come to the enormously difficult decision that in all human probability there is no longer any prospect of forcing the enemy to sue for peace. Two factors have had a decisive influence on our decision, namely, tanks and our reserves.

The enemy has made use of tanks in unexpectedly large numbers. In cases where they have suddenly emerged in huge masses from smoke clouds, our men were completely unnerved. Tanks broke through our foremost lines, making a way for their infantry, reaching our rear, and causing local panics, which entirely upset our battle control. When we were able to locate them our anti-tank guns and our artillery speedily put an end to them.

But the mischief had already been done, and solely owing to the success of the tanks we have suffered enormous losses in prisoners, and this had unexpectedly reduced our strength and caused a more speedy wastage of our reserves than we had anticipated. We were not in a position to make use of similar masses of German tanks. Our manufacturers, under the existing pressure, were absolutely unable to supply them in large numbers, without causing other more important things to be neglected.

The question of reserves has, however, been the decisive factor. The army entered the fray with depleted numbers. In spite of using every possible device, the strength of our battalions sank from about 800 in April, to 540 by the end of September.

And these numbers were only secured by the disbanding of 22 infantry divisions (66 infantry regiments). The Bulgarian defeat has eaten up 7 more divisions. There is no prospect whatever of raising the strength.

The current reserves, consisting of men who are convalescent, combed-out men, etc., will not even cover the losses of a quiet winter campaign. The inclusion of the 1900 class will only increase the strength of the battalions by 100, and that is the last of our reserves.

The losses of the battle which is now in progress are, as I have stated, unexpectedly large, especially as regards officers. That is a decisive factor. If the troops are to stem the onslaught or to attack they require more than ever the example of their officers. The latter must, and have, sacrificed themselves unreservedly. The regimental commanders and leaders fought in the front lines together with their men.

I will give one example only. In two days of fighting one division lost all its officers, dead or wounded, three regimental commanders were killed. The small number of reserve officers has sunk to nothing. The same applies to the N.C.O.'s.

The enemy, owing to the help he has received from America, is in a position to make good his losses. The American troops, as such, are not of special value, or in any way superior to our men. In those cases in which, owing to numbers alone, they gained an initial success, they were finally held at bay by our troops.

They were, however, able to take over large portions of the front, thereby permitting the English and French to liberate some of their experienced divisions and in this way form an almost inexhaustible supply of reserves.

Up till now our reserves have been adequate to fill the gaps and drafts have duly arrived. The hardest attacks were repulsed. The fighting was described to be of unparalleled severity. Then our reserves began to fail. If the enemy continues the attack, the situation may demand a withdrawal from extensive sectors of the front.

We can continue this kind of warfare for a measurable space of time, we can cause the enemy heavy losses, devastating the country in our retreat, but we cannot win the war. This decision and these events caused the idea to ripen in the minds of the Field Marshal and Ludendorff to propose to the Kaiser the breaking-off of hostilities, so as to spare the German people and their Allies further sacrifice.

Just as our great offensive of July 15th was abandoned, when the sacrifice entailed no longer warranted its continuation, so the decision now had to be taken that it was hopeless to proceed with the war.

There is still time. The German army is still strong enough to hold the enemy for months, to achieve local successes and to expose the enemy to fresh sacrifices. But every day brings the enemy nearer his goal, and will make him less inclined to conclude a peace with us which will be satisfactory on our side.

Therefore no time must be lost. Every day the situation may become worse, and give the enemy the opportunity of recognizing our momentary weakness, which might have the most evil consequences for peace prospects as well as for the military situation. Neither the army nor the Homeland should do anything which would make our weakness apparent; on the other hand, the army and the Homeland must stand together more closely than before.

Simultaneously with the peace offer a united front must be shown at home, so that the enemy recognize our unbending will to continue the war, if the enemy will not make peace with us, or only a humiliating one.

If this should be, then the endurance of the army will depend on a firm attitude at home, and on the power of the Homeland to inspire the army.