

Austria's Peace Offer Open to Suspicion

Count Czernin's Overtures May Be Sincere, but May Also Be a Part of Berlin's Game as Cessation of Hostilities at Present Moment Would Mean Teuton Victory

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EVER since the beginning of the present war indirect endeavors have been quietly in progress to detach Austria from her burdensome alliance with Germany. It has been felt in London and in Paris, as well as in Washington, that if the Dual Empire could be brought to sever its ties with Berlin and to negotiate for a separate peace, not only Bulgaria and Turkey but also the great southern States of the German Confederation would follow suit, leaving Prussia to face the Entente alone, and Armageddon would then be within measurable distance.

It is this that lends a certain amount of importance to the advances made toward America by Count Ottocar Czernin, the Foreign Minister and Chancellor of the Hapsburg monarchies. His insistence at Brest-Litovsk that Austria-Hungary is ready to conclude peace with Russia on the basis of no annexations and no indemnities and his declaration to the effect that the interests of his country and those of the United States are "less incompatible than they seem" and that "an exchange of views between America and Austria-Hungary might form a starting point for a conciliatory discussion among all the States which have not yet entered into peace negotiations" cannot be regarded otherwise than as a distinct overture of peace. Indeed it has been construed as such in Germany.

It is fortunate for the people of the United States that they have confided the direction of their interests and of their destinies during the present war to a statesman so sagacious, so farsighted and so little given to impulsiveness as Woodrow Wilson. The overtures of Count Czernin may be sincere and, on the other hand, they may be quite the reverse. They are quite deservedly regarded with suspicion.

For the statecraft of the Dual Empire has ever been unscrupulous and its diplomacy extremely tricky. Austria-Hungary has a sorry record of double crossing her friends and of betraying her allies. Until the commencement of the present war she figured in history as the most unreliable of Powers in the matter of foreign relations. There was no dependence to be placed upon her good faith or upon her pledges. But since 1914 she has yielded her preeminence in this particular to the Berlin Government.

Possibly the Dual Empire may have at length made up her mind to sue for a separate peace, hoping to secure more favorable terms than she could otherwise expect to receive by way of payment for the abandonment of her allies. That would be in keeping with her past. On the other hand, it is quite clear that if by her overtures to the United States she could bring about a general discussion of peace, such as is indicated in the speech of Count Czernin, she would be playing the game of Berlin. For an ending of the war at the present juncture would mean a premature and inconclusive peace, disastrous to the interests of the Entente and of incalculable advantage to Germany.

Ever since the Allies first mooted two years ago at a conference held in Paris their project of organizing after the conclusion of the war an economic boycott of Germany, involving the closing of all Entente ports to Teuton shipping and trade, by way of requital for the atrocities of which she has rendered herself guilty on both land and sea and also as a precautionary measure of defence against her openly avowed plans of securing the economic and consequently the political supremacy of the world, she has been at work with her peace propaganda. I described in these columns a few Sundays ago the manner in which it is directed from its headquarters at Lucerne by Prince Bulow, former Chancellor of the Empire and far and away the shrewdest and most Machiavellian statesman in the service of the Kaiser.

He has behind him the entire big business interests of Germany, which dread above everything else the threatened boycott and which realize that the longer the war continues the more onerous will be the conditions of peace imposed by the victorious Entente and the more deter-

mined will the latter be to put Teuton trade and shipping outside the pale of international intercourse. That is why Prince Bulow and his agents have been spending money in the most lavish manner in fostering pacifist agitation among all the nations of the Entente in the hope of sowing distrust and suspicion between them and of creating popular movements that would not only hamper the Governments of the countries concerned in their conduct of the war but likewise bring pressure to bear upon them in favor of an early and, if necessary, a separate peace with Germany.

Peace at the present moment would be to us peace without victory and therefore without the fulfilment of the aims proclaimed by President Wilson and by the Premiers and Foreign Ministers of the other Entente Powers, namely, the destruction of Hohenzollern militarism and the emancipation of the civilized world for all time from the blight of its ambitious terrorism and from its menace to the cause of peace. A peace at the present moment would be regarded in the light of a drawn game and would leave Germany free to put into execution at once her projects of supremacy on land and at sea, in the economic as well as in the political field, projects of which she makes no concealment.

Peace at this juncture would mean that some years hence we should have to fight this war all over again under even less favorable circumstances, since Germany could be relied upon to remedy the mistakes which she has made in connection with the conflict now in progress. Her newspapers already avow her intention of setting her scientists and chemists at work to invent new explosives, poison gases and death dealing agencies, more destructive and more horrible even than those which she has been employing during the last three years. Finally an inconclusive peace would enable the Kaiser to prepare for putting into execution the threat which he made to Ambassador Gerard at Berlin when he swore to get even with the United States.

Count Czernin's overtures to the United States contained in his recent speech will quite naturally have the effect of strengthening the hands of the pacifist adversaries of the Government in each of the countries of the Entente and will encourage them to increase whatever pressure they can bring to bear upon the Administrations with a view to a cessation of the war. It is quite possible, and even probable, that this is the primary object of Count Czernin's utterances. In fact, their somewhat indefinite tenor would lead to this conclusion.

Count Czernin also realizes—and so does the Berlin Government—that if once negotiations for peace on the lines indicated in his speech are inaugurated, a suspension of hostilities will ensue. It would be to the interest of the Central Powers to prolong this armistice as much as possible by means of those manoeuvres of procrastination so dear to diplomacy. Were the fighting to be suspended for several weeks, perhaps for a few months, it is doubtful whether it could be resumed; at any rate, not under the present conditions, which are distinctly favorable to the Allies.

All of these things point to the belief that Count Czernin's overtures of peace to the United States, and through the United States to the remainder of the Allies, have the full approval of the Berlin Government in spite of the extraordinary divergence of the views which he has expressed and those of the German Chancellor, Count Hertling. That Czernin's conciliatory attitude should be denounced by a number of Teuton newspapers as a betrayal of Germany means little or nothing. For in all likelihood they have acted in the matter under the direction of the Imperial Press Bureau at Berlin in order to eliminate any idea of collusion between the two Chancellors. In fact this abuse of Count Czernin may be regarded as a mere bit of camouflage.

In considering the contradictory speeches of Count Hertling and Count Czernin it is necessary also to bear in mind the domestic political conditions of the two allied empires. Indeed every political utterance by European statesmen who are at the helm in their respective countries must be construed in the light of the

internal difficulties with which they have to contend. Thus, not all the arguments recently employed by Premier Lloyd George to win over British labor to a continuance of the war until final and conclusive victory were intended for foreign consumption and it was a mistake to treat them in the light of manifestoes to other nations of the foreign policies of the British Empire.

In Germany there are still two rival parties, namely the Militarist party, which is bent upon a continuation of the war to final German victory and mastery of the world, that is to say, which is committed to war a *outrance*, and the other party, composed of the great business interests, of the bourgeoisie, of the masses, of the Socialists and of the rank and file of the army, which is eager for peace on the most favorable terms, indeed, at any price, provided it comes at once. Count Hertling's speech was for the purpose of conciliating the Militarist party, which, composed mainly of the upper and the inferior aristocracy and of the officers' caste, still retains through its control of the army the power to overthrow the Government and to run things to suit itself at Berlin. Count Czernin's speech, on the other hand, was intended to conciliate the pro-peace party in Germany and to avert the revolution which is menacing the Government and the dynasty of the Dual Empire.

No matter whether Count Czernin is acting in collusion with the German Chancellor or whether he is really sincere in his overtures of peace to the United States and to the other Powers of the Entente, there is no doubt whatsoever that the people of Austria-Hungary of every class, from the Emperor and Empress downward, are bent upon peace without delay, upon a universal peace if practicable, or, if that is impossible, then a separate peace for the Hapsburg monarchies.

Unless peace comes quickly the revolution which has been seething for some time past will boil over, and if ever the masses get out of hand in Austria-Hungary we may have a repetition there of the conditions of utterly indescribable chaos, anarchy and general confusion and destruction which have prevailed for the last twelve months in Russia. It is only by immediate peace that the overthrow of the Hapsburg dynasty can be averted and that any semblance of government with law and order can be maintained. It is necessary to bear this in mind in considering the utterances of Count Czernin.

The people of Austria-Hungary feel that they have been sacrificed in the present war to Emperor William's lust for conquest and his insanely extravagant yearnings for the mastery of the universe. The war was not of their seeking. Aside from a small but very influential militarist ring at Vienna working in close understanding with the Kaiser, everybody in Austria-Hungary was averse to war and no one more so than the late Emperor Francis Joseph, who in the memoirs just published of the late Peter Sabouloff, one of the ablest of Russian statesmen, is recorded to have remarked very sadly on one occasion:

"They accuse me of being anxious for new conquests. How can you believe I dream anything of the kind with the bad luck that has followed me all my life? I have been beaten by the French, beaten by the Prussians, beaten even by the Italians—for the battle of Custoza was really lost and if the Italians retired it was as the result of telegraphic order from Paris. I gave up war long ago. I have no luck."

This was several years before the commencement of the present war, into which he and his country were forced and manoeuvred by Kaiser Wilhelm.

It is because the Hapsburg monarchy and the people subject to its rule have always been regarded abroad as reluctant and unwilling accomplices of Germany in the precipitation of the present war, long planned in advance at Berlin, that they have from the very outset of the conflict been considered as the weakest link in the chain of Central Powers that extends from Berlin via Vienna and Sofia to Constantinople. It was known that the Hohenzollerns and the Prussians have ever been hated in Austria-Hungary, the animosity against them antedating even the Six Weeks War in 1866 and the Seven Years

War in the days of Maria Theresa and of Frederick the Great. The last four years have served still further to develop and foster this hate.

The Kaiser and his Prussian officers and officials have usurped authority in the Dual Empire with an amount of tactlessness *sui generis*. It has been galling in the extreme to the Government and to the people of Austria-Hungary and the yoke of Berlin upon Vienna has become intolerable.

In the event of the defeat of the Entente this yoke, so arrogant in its despotism, would become permanent and the Dual Empire would become a mere vassal State of Prussia. Her only hope of emancipation from this thralldom and of the recovery of at least some remnant of her independence and national dignity is based on the defeat of the Kaiser.

That Emperor Francis Joseph was averse to the present war is a matter of history. It is equally well established that the present ruler of the Dual Empire and his Bourbon consort are anxious for peace. They, as well as other members of the reigning family and the greatest nobles of the two realms, have joined the masses in public prayers for peace.

On his accession Emperor Charles dismissed from office all statesmen and dignitaries of the court who were identified with the cause of war and with the military junta at Berlin and appointed in their places men who had been conspicuous in the expression of their desire for peace. Among them have been Count Ottocar Czernin, Prince Berchtold and Prince Conrad Hohenlohe.

Indeed, the entire course pursued by the Vienna Government under the present reign has been in the direction of peace, tempered, hampered and obstructed most of the time by Berlin influences and intrigues. Emperor Charles realizes that a peace at the present time, even a separate peace, would enable him to save his dynasty and to retain a considerable portion of his dominions, even at the expense of some heavy territorial sacrifices, but that if he remains with Germany to the bitter end and until her ultimate defeat it means the disappearance of the Hapsburg monarchies from the concert of nations.

Incidentally it may be stated that whereas all British and French capital has been withdrawn from Germany, vast sums of French and English money still remain invested in Austrian and Hungarian industrial and commercial enterprises. This is very significant. It accounts for the economic relations which despite all assertions to the contrary still continue through Switzerland between British and French capitalists and Austro-Hungarian captains of industry, of trade and of finance, relations the existence of which has been confirmed by the publication of the series of confidential despatches found by the Bolshevik Foreign Minister Trotsky in the Government archives at Petrograd and made public during the last fortnight.

With regard to Bulgaria, her people were forced against their will and contrary to their religious and political interests into the war by King Ferdinand in consequence of the threat of the Kaiser to confiscate all his estates and his large fortune in Germany unless he committed his people to an alliance with the Central Powers. The alliance has always been unpopular among the Bulgarians, and now that King Ferdinand appreciates that he has backed the wrong horse they may be depended upon to desert the Kaiser if Austria leads the way.

It is the same with the Turks, who are heartily sick of a war that has involved them in disaster of every kind and in the loss of many of their most important provinces, including the holy places of Islam, the possession of which was necessary to their prestige. As for the South Germans, they execrate the Hohenzollerns and Prussia even more than do the Austrians, and are just as eager for liberation from the tyrannic domination of Berlin. Their sentiments are best indicated by the title which they accept of "Muss-Preussen." If Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria and Turkey deserted the coalition of the Central Powers, they might be relied upon to follow in their train, leaving the Entente free to face with only the Kaiser and his Kingdom of Prussia.