

Ian Mitchell's History-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

38 – *Reflections on the War*
(3 April 2019)

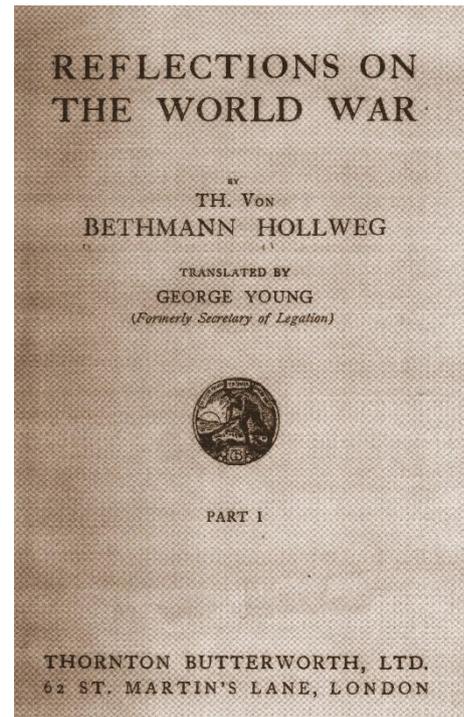
REFLECTIONS ON THE WORLD WAR

Author: Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg

Publisher: Thornton Butterworth, 1919
(available free on [Archive.org](#), [click on cover image for link](#))

Descriptor: The origins of the First World War as described by the man who was German Chancellor from 1909-1917

RusRoL relevance: *Reveals the unquestioned assumptions about international STATUS held by the German government, and why the Treaty (i.e. CONTRACT) binding Germany to observance of Belgian neutrality, could be regarded as a “scrap of paper”.*



Reason to read: People with honest work to do, or a full social calendar, can ignore chapters 2-5, but chapters 1, 6 and 7 are of absorbing interest, especially in the light of [The Trial of the Kaiser](#). How guilty was the Kaiser's Germany of starting the war? As the Kaiser's “chief executive” at the time, how guilty was the author of this book? Prof Schabas, in *The Trial*, assumes that Germany played the major part and should bear most of the guilt. Bethmann-Hollweg naturally does not see it that way. After the recent snowstorm of books published to cash in on the centenary of the war, it is refreshing to go back and read an account written at the time, by a participant, and especially one from the other side. What does Bethmann-Hollweg have to say in his own, and his country's, defence? The short answer is that it was the weakness of the Tsar and the opportunism and sanctimony of Britain that was responsible for his country's behaviour. Berlin's decisions were, so to speak, taken in St Petersburg and London. Bethmann-Hollweg accepts that Germany caused the war to start, but he maintains that it did so only after intolerable provocation.

Main talking points: I will confine myself to three related ones:

1. The “scrap of paper”: For the purposes of *Russia and the Rule of Law*, this is a fundamental issue: what value does STATUS place on diplomatic CONTRACT? Bethmann-Hollweg tells us of the conversation in which he used the phrase that came to symbolise the alleged (and probably actual) German approach to “little people”. On 4th August 1914, the day after Germany declared

war on France and sent troops in massive numbers across the Belgian border in order to get to Paris by a shorter and less well-defended route, Bethmann-Hollweg met with the British Ambassador, Sir Edward Goschen. He had just delivered a British ultimatum demanding that Germany withdraw from Belgium. After the German Foreign Minister, Gottlieb von Jagow, rejected the ultimatum, Goschen asked Bethmann-Hollweg, as the head of the Reich's government, whether he would not over-rule von Jagow. This is what Bethmann-Hollweg writes about the request and his response: "On my refusing [to accept the ultimatum], the Ambassador asked whether, supposing war were to his deep regret finally decided on, we could not have before parting a private and personal conversation as to the awful situation in which the world found itself. I at once agreed and asked the Ambassador to dinner. I then went on to speak in very strong terms of the world disaster that I could see would necessarily follow the entry of England into the war and, after Sir Edward had more than once brought up the question of Belgian neutrality as the deciding point, I ejaculated impatiently that compared with the fearful fact of an Anglo-German war, the treaty of neutrality was only a scrap of paper. The expression was perhaps an indiscretion but my blood boiled at his hypocritical harping on Belgian neutrality which was not the thing that had driven England into war and at his complete lack of perception that an English declaration of war must destroy so much that was of value in the world that a violation of Belgian neutrality was of comparatively little weight." (pp. 158-9)

2. Great Power politics: Bethmann-Hollweg discusses this subject in his Conclusion (chapter 7). He talks of the change in war from a "chivalric" contest to a "delirious massacre, destructive of every moral sense". He then says this: "Even if, in the course of time, spiritual power should get control of material force, even so force will still remain the symbol of national life, and it will be as little within the power of communities as of individuals to curb completely the primaevial forces of selfishness." (p. 168) The interest of this passage lies in its author's apparent inability to see that primaevial forces can be harnessed by law in a rules-based system of international relations—just as, though not so easily as, "animal spirits" can be channelled in capital markets. But STATUS was blind to the possibilities of CONTRACT. Civilised countries (i.e. those which try to live by the rules and customs of CONTRACT) do not see force as the "symbol of national life", but rather a disagreeable necessity which cannot be dispensed with if mutual agreements are not to be treated as so many "scraps of paper".
3. Army trumps politics: Having decided that Germany had to declare war on Russia, and that this meant it had to do the same to France, Bethmann-Hollweg effectively handed over direction of the ensuing conflict to the military. This is how the supreme civil authority in Germany at the time, the Kaiser's Chancellor, describes the choice before him: "Military opinion held that a condition of success for the Western offensive was passage through Belgium. Herein the political and military interests came into sharp conflict. The offence against Belgium was obvious, and the general political consequences of such an offence were in no way obscure. The Chief of our General Staff, General von Moltke, was not blind to this consideration but declared that it was a case of absolute military necessity. *I had to accommodate my view to his...* It would have been a heavy burden of responsibility for a civilian to have thwarted a military plan that had been elaborated in every detail and decided to be essential." (p. 147) (emphasis added)

Incidental interest: There are many smaller issues of German internal history which are interesting in this book, like blaming Russia for most things, and two points that are made more than once: first, that King Edward VIII pursued a policy of encirclement of Germany and, secondly, that the Kaiser was at all times a man of peace. One non-point might also be mentioned: there not a single mention of the American position. Bethmann-Hollweg takes a completely Eurocentric view, even though the book was written in 1919 when Woodrow Wilson was trying to change all that.

Thought(s) provoked: If the war had been fought only to enforce CONTRACT on rampant, unbiddable STATUS (which it partly was) then it might arguably have been worth it. But the achievement, such as it was, ended up being squandered by the victors' treatment of Germany at Versailles, with the result that we were all soon back to even more rampant STATUS assertion and contempt for CONTRACT. The Allies' approach to peace defeated their own apparent war aims—or were they also vulnerable to the siren song of STATUS?

Style: Clear and coherent but dull and impersonal.

Author: Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg was a Prussian aristocrat descended from Berlin lawyers who had married into Frankfurt money in the eighteenth century. He wanted friendship with Britain but did not understand the way the country was changing and so misjudged crucial signals, especially over the issue of Belgian neutrality. This is where a competent German spy in London (see [Gordievsky review](#) “Thoughts Provoked”) might have served the cause of peace well by keeping people like Bethmann-Hollweg better informed about Britain's true intentions—assuming, that is, that Germany really did not want war.



Link(s): A bit too early for that, except you can see Bethmann-Hollweg after being appointed Chancellor here: <https://www.sofatutor.com/geschichte/videos/7-juli-1909-theobald-von-bethmann-hollweg-wird-reichskanzler>

Overall recommendation level: MODERATE, mostly

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [Isles of the West](#) and [The Justice Factory](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ianbookrec@gmail.com. For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell's Book Recommendations](#).