

Kaiser Wilhelm I on the Social Ethos of Prussian Officers (1879)

Abstract

The Prussian officer corps was a pillar of Imperial Germany. Consequently, this group received considerable attention from Kaiser Wilhelm I (ruled 1861–1888) and his successors. In this decree the Kaiser specifies what he considers to be the essential traits of a Prussian officer: camaraderie, honor, and loyalty unto death. Equally revealing is his concern that officers may not be resistant enough to the lures of comfortable living, personal vice, “speculative dabbling” in the stock market, and arrogance towards civilians.

Source

“Introduction to the decree on professional tribunals etc.” from May 2, 1879: I wish that the decree, signed by Me today, on professional tribunals of officers in My army will be understood and applied in the very spirit that has distinguished My armed forces since time immemorial.

Consequently, I expect that in the future, just as in the past, the entire officer corps of My armed forces will regard honor as the greatest treasure; keeping it pure and untainted must be the most sacred duty of the entire profession as well as each individual. Fulfillment of this duty includes the conscientious and complete execution of all other officer’s duties. True honor cannot exist without loyalty unto death, without unshakable courage, firm resolve, self-abnegating obedience, sincere truthfulness, strict discretion, and the self-sacrificing performance of even the most seemingly trivial duties. This honor demands that the officer’s civilian life is marked by dignity as well, deriving from the awareness of belonging to a class entrusted with the defense of throne and fatherland. — For social interaction, the officer shall strive to choose circles in which good manners predominate; and in public places, in particular, he must never lose sight of the fact that he appears not only as an educated man, but also as an upholder of honor and of the added responsibilities of his class. Of all the activities that may adversely affect the reputation of the individual or his social group, the officer must distance himself in particular from all excesses, drinking, and gambling, from assuming any obligations that might entail even the faintest suggestion of dishonesty, from speculative dabbling in stocks, from partnership in acquisitive societies whose objectives are not inviolable and whose reputation is not flawless, as well as from any profit aspirations whose integrity is not clearly discernible. He must never pledge his word of honor without due care.

The more that luxury and high living spread in other circles, the more the officer’s profession is faced with the duty of never forgetting that it is not by way of material goods that it has acquired and will maintain its highly esteemed position in state and society. It is not just that the military efficiency of the officer may be impaired by a comfortable, enervating lifestyle; the actual danger is that profit aspirations and a life of luxury would shake the very foundations of the officer ranks.

The more enthusiastically the officer corps cultivate true comradeship and *esprit de corps*, the more easily they will prevent excesses, guide comrades who have strayed from the straight and narrow back to the right path, and avoid unnecessary quarrels and disgraceful squabbling.

The justified confidence of the officer must never degenerate into lack of respect or arrogance towards the other classes. The more an officer loves his profession and the more highly he regards its purpose,

the more he will understand that the full confidence of other social groups in the officer's profession is a prerequisite for the successful and glorious accomplishment of the armed forces' ultimate and highest objective.

I have full confidence in the officers on leave and in the retired officers, whom I have permitted to keep the external signs of their professional class, and [I believe] that they, having a lasting share in the social ethos, will always remember their obligation to uphold this honor, even in their civilian lives. [...]

Source: Max Menzel, *Der Infanterie-Einjährige und Offizier des Beurlaubtenstandes*, 11th ed. Berlin: Eisenschmidt, 1911, pp. 271–72; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982. pp. 227–28.

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