

Kaiser Wilhelm II, Cabinet Order on the Officer Corps (March 29, 1890)

Abstract

The reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II (1888–1918) saw an expansion of the army for several reasons, including excessive fear of “encirclement.” The available supply of aristocratic young men, however, was insufficient to allow for such expansion. In this Cabinet Order issued only days after Bismarck’s resignation, the Kaiser makes a virtue of necessity. As a means to balance numbers and quality, he stipulates that the expansion of the officer corps should also include loyal members of the bourgeoisie: a “nobility of spirit,” he writes, not wealth or privilege, should be the main criterion for selecting recruits. Wilhelm also seeks to reduce the level of financial contributions demanded of young officers in order to make an army career more attractive to middle-class aspirants.

Source

[...] The gradual augmentation of the army contingents has substantially increased the total number of budgeted officer posts. Finding as many highly suitable candidates as possible for these posts is an urgent matter, particularly in light of the demands placed on the army in the event of a war. Currently, there are considerable gaps in almost all infantry and artillery regiments. This situation means that the recruitment of adequate and suitable replacements is daily becoming an ever more important and serious duty of troop commanders. The increased educational level of our population allows for the possibility of extending the circle of those eligible for replenishing the officer corps. Today, unlike in the past, it is not just nobility of birth that may alone claim the privilege of providing officers for the army. But the nobility of spirit that has always filled the officer corps should and must remain intact and unchanged. And this is only possible if the officer candidates are recruited from circles in which nobility of spirit is deeply rooted. Along with the descendants of the nation’s noble families and the sons of My worthy officers and public servants, who have traditionally formed the cornerstone of the officer corps, I also see the future mainstay of My army in the sons of honorable bourgeois families that cultivate and instill love for king and fatherland, enthusiasm for the military profession and Christian morality. I cannot give My approval when some commanders create their own, one-sided criteria for recruiting officers’ replacements, when, for instance, the requirements regarding academic training are so stringent that a young man’s admission is absolutely contingent upon the completion of the *Abitur* [secondary school diploma]. I must disapprove when admission depends upon [the payment of] an excessively high personal contribution, for this shuts out the sons of families who have little property but are nonetheless close to the officer corps in terms of attitude and outlook on life. In order to put an end to such unfavorable circumstances, I make My wish known that, as a rule, commanders should not demand more than 45 marks in monthly contributions in the case of infantry, riflemen, artillery on foot, and pioneers; not more than 70 marks for field-artillery; and not more than 150 marks for cavalry. I do not fail to recognize that the situation of some larger garrisons, especially those of the Garde de Corps, may require slight increases. I deem it unfavorable for the interests of the army, however, when requirements for private contributions for infantry and riflemen have reached 75 and 100 marks—in some instances even more, and when those for the cavalry, namely the Garde de Corps, have reached such a level that it is almost impossible for a landowner to have his sons join the branch of the service that he favors. Such exaggerated demands hinder the replacement of officers in terms of volume and quality. In My army, I do not want the reputation of the officer corps to be determined by the amount of the entrance fees, and I have especially high appreciation for those regiments whose officers make do with modest funds and

still know how to fulfill their duties with the satisfaction and joy that have distinguished the Prussian officer since time immemorial. It is the responsibility of troop commanders to devote the utmost effort to pursuing this goal. They must realize without fail that today, more than ever before, it is essential to awaken and cultivate personalities, to increase the level of self-abnegation among their officers, and that their own example must advance this objective above all. As I again charge commanders with the responsibility of countering a number of luxury excesses, manifested in costly presents, frequent banquets, exaggerated extravagance for social events, and similar things, I also deem it appropriate to oppose the notion that the commander is, by virtue of his rank, obligated to spend large sums for purposes of representation. Each officer can serve his circle of comrades through the appropriate sponsorship of a simple kind of sociability befitting the profession; according to My wishes, only commanding generals have a “representative” obligation, and in My army, accomplished field officers will not have to anxiously anticipate the financial sacrifices supposedly awaiting them in the case of a promotion to regiment commander. From time to time, in addition to the requests concerning officer candidates, I will ask for submission of proof regarding the usual contributions and pay deductions in the various military units. Just as I hereby demand to be provided the names of officers who do not comply with their superiors’ efforts to simplify their lifestyle, so too will I judge commanders as to whether, among other things, they succeed in recruiting suitable young officers in sufficient numbers, and in organizing the activities of their officer corps in a simple way at little cost. — It is My wish that, after duty is done, each of My officers takes joy in his life. The uncontrolled spread of luxury in the army, however, has to be combated with all seriousness and vigor.

Berlin, March 29, 1890
Wilhelm R.

Source: *Militär-Wochenblatt*, vol. 75, no. 32 (April 9, 1890), Berlin, 1890, pp. 1009–12; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 5th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 95–97.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Kaiser Wilhelm II, Cabinet Order on the Officer Corps (March 29, 1890), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-663>> [March 06, 2026].