

The Ideology of the Officer Corps (1889)

Abstract

The high expectations placed on the officer corps became a frequent subject of discussion in Bismarckian Germany. This 1889 article from a military journal preaches that the army's reputation for moral virtue and its claim of "high rank on the scale of human society" are both well-founded: the state-supporting function of the officer corps is taken as self-evident, as are the need for absolute loyalty and opposition to republican ideals. Officers are seen as missionaries of military attitudes among civilians. Yet this article also anticipates Kaiser Wilhelm II's call for a "nobility of spirit" that will include non-aristocratic recruits: "knights of intellect" drawn from the bourgeoisie will produce a new "nobility in arms" that will enjoy the same professional distinction as the old.

Source

Every German's pride is the army, the bloom of the nation. Germany's army—Germany's glory! The most distinguished part of the army, however, the elite portion, is the officer corps.

"The spirit of the army is rooted in its officers," says General von R  chel,[\[1\]](#) and rightly so. They are the unmistakable measure of the usefulness and effectiveness of the army; the upholders of the moral element and of all the idealistic, ethical qualities that can alone guarantee sustained military success, and without which the army cannot fulfill its high mission as protector of throne and Fatherland in difficult times.

Therefore, the state of the officer corps is of the utmost importance; it is crucial to the value of the entire army. This situation simply reflects the experience of life in general: the lower classes are always what the upper classes make of them. As long as the higher, leading classes, the upper ten thousand, maintain moral virtue and health, the people remain strong and vital as well; the moral decay of the ruling classes, on the other hand, inexorably results in the decline of the entire nation. [...]

In no other country in the world is the officer class on such a high level; nowhere else does it assume such a high rank on the scale of human society, such a reputable and respected position as in Germany. [...]

Even though the officer's profession is no longer the monopoly of the nobility, as it was in the past, even today only peers—only knights in intellect and gentlemen in education and attitude—may become members and comrades in this distinguished profession.

The nobility in arms has to rank equally with hereditary nobility. Aristocratic honor and officer's honor are identical in all respects; the latter undoubtedly originates in the former.

The officer's honor has been shaped from the knightly disposition which, founded on Christianity, included honesty, truthfulness, respect for women, and manly faithfulness; by being admitted to this class, the individual newcomer is personally knighted, so to speak.

This honorable, privileged position and the high regard that makes the German officer a nobleman in the eyes of the people represents, as it were, the spiritual reward for his meager pay. In the midst of our materialist, realist times, this constitutes the idealistic element among those of the officer class, who sacrifice their lives and health for loyalty to the king and love of the Fatherland and joyfully give their all for honor, while getting so little in return. [...]

Both the bourgeois and the noble officer represent the same principle, the aristocratic *Weltanschauung* [world view] as opposed to the democratic one.

The young officer from a bourgeois family shows through his choice of the officer's profession that, in terms of his education and views, he regards himself as belonging to the aristocracy of spirit and conviction that inspires the officer; that he wishes to belong to the modern knighthood that His Majesty demands from his officers. [...]

At the same time, the high standing of the officer as part of the first and most distinguished profession in the state imposes the most onerous responsibilities on him; for increased privileges are predicated exclusively on increased obligations. Noblesse oblige!

Whoever makes the officer's profession his own also assumes its responsibilities; [he] adopts as his own the views that are inherent to the profession, that derive from its basic principle.

Whoever cannot share these views or subscribes to other principles must choose a different profession, unless he wishes to be a hypocrite. The basic convictions deriving from the ancient principles of the officer class are: a pro-dynastic attitude, unconditional loyalty to the person of the monarch, heightened patriotism, preservation of the status quo, defense of the royal prerogatives entrusted to his protection, and opposition to unpatriotic, anti-monarchical attitudes, etc. The first and foremost duty, the most beautiful virtue in the glorious wreath of the officer, is loyalty; it is at the same time his *raison d'être*.

"It is the noble person's greatest luck;
To serve a ruler that he honors."

The fame and pride of the German officers corps is based on its unquestioning loyalty.

Ratio regis suprema lex!

The Fatherland's army is the foundation of the state, the king's shield, the bastion of the monarchy. [...]

Before all others, the officer is called upon to carry forth the banner of kingship by God's grace, to let it fly high, and to protect God's sacred order on earth from the dark powers of anarchy. And never before was his vocation as important as in our day. The officer corps and thus the army shall be the rock in the raging sea of deeply aroused passions: united with the church, it will be the *rocher de bronze* on which anarchy—God willing—shall be smashed to pieces.

Like an iron wall of loyalty, the German officer corps stands firm before the thrones of its royal houses, keeping a guard of honor over the greatest treasures of the Fatherland.

"Firm in loyalty, loyal in the storm!" [...]

The position of the officer makes it imperative that he fight against all political currents that oppose rule by the grace of God; against everything that strives to curtail the legitimate rights of monarchy; and against all tendencies that ultimately lead to the denial of divine and human authority, the dissolution of all existing order, and the undermining of the rule of law.

Without being a politician in any way, he [the officer] has to instinctively advocate all those principles that would be described in politics as loyal to the monarchy.

All this is included in the position of officer, is required by the oath sworn to the officer's king, corresponds to the spirit and traditions of the Prussian-German officer corps, and is demanded by a kind of loyalty that is so much more than mere obedience. [...]

Furthermore, it is extremely important that even officers in the reserve and the militia, who have such extraordinary influence on the population, always allow their own convictions to be inspired and strengthened anew by the example of their active colleagues whenever they are called to serve. For even in peacetime, officers on leave have a very important responsibility. They stand with one foot in the army and the other among the people. Therefore, they are [the ones] most truly qualified to spread and uphold the desire and love for the king's service within broad segments of society. They can be the most active advocates for all interests of the Fatherland's army.

May those fellow gentlemen on leave always take the traditions and views of the officer's profession as their guiding principle even in their civilian lives, and may they remain not only obedient to their king but also loyal under all circumstances! Even when they are on leave, His Majesty is counting on their service!

NOTES

[1] Ernst Philipp von R chel (1784–1823), Prussian general—ed.

Source: *Milit r-Wochenblatt*, vol. 74, no. 62 (July 20, 1889) and no. 67 (August 7, 1889), Berlin, 1889, pp. 1311–12, 1314–15, 1452, 1454, 1456; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1914. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 5th ed. G ttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, pp. 92–94.

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Recommended Citation: The Ideology of the Officer Corps (1889), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-665>> [July 13, 2025].