

“We Germans Fear God and Nothing Else in the World!”: Bismarck Addresses the Reichstag (February 6, 1888)

Abstract

The text below is an extract from one of Bismarck’s most famous speeches. “We Germans fear God and nothing else in the world!”—this line was remembered and commemorated *ad nauseum* by German nationalists. But in fact this stirring phrase comes at the very end of the speech and is preceded by Bismarck’s declaration that the German Empire, a “satiated nation,” must avoid getting embroiled in dangerous coalitions and conflicts. Moreover, the famous line is immediately followed by one that most Germans ignored: “It is this fear of God which makes us love and cherish peace.” This was Bismarck’s last major Reichstag speech on foreign policy before his dismissal from office in March 1890.

Source

[...] great complications and all kinds of coalitions, which no one can foresee, are constantly possible, and we must be prepared for them. We must be so strong, irrespective of momentary conditions, that we can face any coalition

(Bravo!)

with the assurance of a great nation which is strong enough under circumstances to take her fate into her own hands. We must be able to face our fate placidly with that self reliance and confidence in God which are ours when we are strong and our cause is just. And the government will see to it that the German cause will be just always.

(Bravo!)

We must, to put it briefly, be as strong in these times as we possibly can be, and we can be stronger than any other nation of equal numbers in the world.

(Bravo!)

I shall revert to this later—but it would be criminal if we were not to make use of our opportunity. If we do not need our full armed strength, we need not summon it. The only problem is the not very weighty one of money—not very weighty I say in passing, because I have no wish to enter upon a discussion of the financial and military figures, and of the fact that France has spent three milliards for the improvement of her armaments these last years, while we have spent scarcely one and one half milliards, including what we are asking of you at this time.

(Hear, hear! to the right.)

But I leave the elucidation of this to the minister of war and the representatives of the treasury department.

When I say that it is our duty to endeavor to be ready at all times and for all emergencies, I imply that we must make greater exertions than other people for the same purpose, because of our geographical position. We are situated in the heart of Europe, and have at least three fronts open to an attack. France has only her eastern, and Russia only her western frontier where they may be attacked. We are also more

exposed to the dangers of a coalition than any other nation, as is proved by the whole development of history, by our geographical position, and the lesser degree of cohesiveness, which until now has characterized the German nation in comparison with others. God has placed us where we are prevented, thanks to our neighbors, from growing lazy and dull. He has placed by our side the most warlike and restless of all nations, the French, and He has permitted warlike inclinations to grow strong in Russia, where formerly they existed to a lesser degree. Thus we are given the spur, so to speak, from both sides, and are compelled to exertions which we should perhaps not be making otherwise. The pikes in the European carp-pond are keeping us from being carps

(Cheering.)

by making us feel their teeth on both sides. They also are forcing us to an exertion which without them we might not make, and to a union among us Germans, which is abhorrent to us at heart.

(Cheering.)

By nature we are rather tending away, the one from the other. But the Franco-Russian press within which we are squeezed compels us to hold together, and by pressure our cohesive force is greatly increased. This will bring us to that state of being inseparable which all other nations possess, while we do not yet enjoy it.

(Bravo!)

But we must respond to the intentions of Providence by making ourselves so strong that the pikes can do nothing but encourage us.

(Cheering.)

[...]

If we Germans wish to wage a war with the full effect of our national strength, it must be a war which satisfies all who take part in it, all who sacrifice anything for it, in short the whole nation. It must be a national war, a war carried on with the enthusiasm of 1870, when we were foully attacked. I still remember the earsplitting, joyful shouts in the station at Köln. It was the same all the way from Berlin to Köln, in Berlin itself. The waves of popular approval bore us into the war, whether or no we wished it. That is the way it must be, if a popular force like ours is to show what it can do. It will, however, be very difficult to prove to the provinces and the imperial states and their inhabitants that the war is unavoidable, and has to be. People will ask: "Are you so sure? Who can tell?" In short, when we make an attack, the whole weight of all imponderables, which weigh far heavier than material weights, will be on the side of our opponents whom we have attacked. ["Holy Russia" will be indignant about the attack.] France will be bristling with arms way down to the Pyrenees. The same will take place everywhere. A war into which we are not borne by the will of the people will be waged, to be sure, if it has been declared by the constituted authorities who deemed it necessary; it will even be waged pluckily, and possibly victoriously, after we have once smelled fire and tasted blood, but it will lack from the beginning the nerve and enthusiasm of a war in which we are attacked. In such a one the whole of Germany from Memel to the Alpine Lakes will flare up like a powder mine; it will be bristling with guns, and no enemy will dare to engage this *furor teutonicus* which develops when we are attacked.

(Bravo!)

We cannot afford to lose this factor of preeminence even if many military men—not only ours but others as well—believe that today we are superior to our future opponents. Our own officers believe this to a man, naturally. Every soldier believes this. He would almost cease to be a useful soldier if he did not wish

for war, and did not believe that we would be victorious in it. If our opponents by any chance are thinking that we are pacific because we are afraid of how the war may end, they are mightily mistaken.

(Very true!)

We believe as firmly in our victory in a just cause as any foreign lieutenant in his garrison, after his third glass of champagne, can believe in his,

(Cheering.)

and we probably do so with greater certainty. It is not fear, therefore, which makes us pacific, but the consciousness of our strength. We are strong enough to protect ourselves, even if we should be attacked at a less favorable moment, and we are in a position to let divine providence determine whether a war in the meanwhile may not become unnecessary after all.

I am, therefore, not in favor of any kind of an aggressive war, and if war could result only from our attack—somebody must kindle a fire, we shall not kindle it.

(Bravo!)

Neither the consciousness of our strength, which I have described, nor our confidence in our treaties, will prevent us from continuing our former endeavors to preserve peace. In this we do not permit ourselves to be influenced by annoyances or dislikes. The threats and insults, and the challenges, which have been made have, no doubt, excited also with us a feeling of irritation,

(Very true!)

which does not easily happen with Germans, for they are less prone to national hatred than any other nation. We are, however, trying to calm our countrymen, and we shall work for peace with our neighbors, especially with Russia, in the future as well as in the past. [...]

To sum up: I do not believe in an immediate interruption of peace, and I ask you to discuss this bill independently of such a thought or apprehension, looking upon it as a means of making the great strength which God has placed in the German nation fully available. If we do not need all the troops, it is not necessary to summon them. We are trying to avoid the contingency when we shall need them.

This attempt is as yet made rather difficult for us by the threatening newspaper articles in the foreign press, and I should like to admonish these foreign editors to discontinue such threats. They do not lead anywhere. The threats which we see made—not by the governments, but by the press—are really incredibly stupid,

(Cheering.)

when we stop to reflect that the people making them imagine they could frighten the proud and powerful German empire by certain intimidating figures made by printer's ink and shallow words.

(Bravo!)

People should not do this. It would then be easier for us to be more obliging to our two neighbors. Every country after all is sooner or later responsible for the windows which its press has smashed. The bill will be rendered some day, and will consist of the ill-feeling of the other country. We are easily influenced—perhaps too easily—by love and kindness, but quite surely never by threats!

(Bravo!)

We Germans fear God, and nothing else in the world!

(Resounding Bravo.)

It is this fear of God which makes us love and cherish peace. If in spite of this anybody breaks the peace, he will discover that the ardent patriotism of 1813, which called to the standards the entire population of Prussia—weak, small, and drained to the marrow as it then was—has today become the common property of the whole German nation. Attack the German nation anywhere, and you will find it armed to a man, and every man with the firm belief in his heart: God will be with us.

(Resounding, continuous applause.)

Source of English translation: Theodore S. Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck: Documents and Interpretations*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973, pp. 290–93. Please note: the interjections (“Bravo!”, etc.) do not appear in Hamerow’s translation. They have been translated by the GHDI staff and inserted into the speech at the appropriate points.

Source of original German text: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags*, 7th legislative period, 30th sitting (February 6, 1888), 1887/88, vol. 2. Berlin, 1888, pp. 723–33. Available online at: https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt3_k7_bsb00018648_00033.html. Reprinted in Peter Wende, in cooperation with Inge Schlotzhauer, eds., *Bibliothek der Geschichte und Politik. Politische Reden II. 1869–1914*, vol. 25. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990, pp. 315–52, here 329–31, 346–48, 351–52.

Recommended Citation: “We Germans Fear God and Nothing Else in the World!”: Bismarck Addresses the Reichstag (February 6, 1888), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1865>> [April 20, 2024].