

# Friedrich Ebert, “Address to the Homecoming Troops” (December 10, 1918)

## Abstract

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Just a few hours before the Social Democratic Party (SPD) proclaimed the parliamentary republic on November 9, Reich Chancellor Max von Baden announced the abdication of the Kaiser and transferred the office of Reich Chancellor to SPD leader Friedrich Ebert, as the SPD had the strongest parliamentary group in the Reichstag. The next day, Ebert, together with five other politicians from the SPD and USPD, formed the Council of People’s Deputies, which took over the reins of government until the elections to the National Assembly on January 19, 1919. In his function as co-chairman of the Council of People’s Deputies, Ebert gave a welcoming speech a month later, on December 10, to nine returning divisions, who were given a jubilant reception in Berlin. While acknowledging the sacrifice that the war veterans had made for Germany under its old government, Ebert primarily expressed his hope that the former soldiers would integrate productively into the new republic.

## Source

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Welcome to the German Republic, comrades, a warm welcome to a homeland that has been longing for you, one constantly filled with anxious concern for your welfare. At this moment, when we welcome you back to hearth and home, our first thoughts are of the precious dead. Alas, so many will never return. Hundreds of thousands rest in silent graves on enemy soil, while hundreds of thousands more were forced to return before the end of fighting, mangled and mutilated by enemy fire. All of you who sacrificed to protect the homeland have our indelible gratitude. We can never repay your self-sacrifice, and mere words cannot suffice as thanks. What we can do to thank you we shall do in utmost devotion.

Improving the lot of war widows and orphans and wounded soldiers was the first order of business for the new German people’s state. You have fortunately escaped the terrible slaughter. We welcome you back home with joy. We welcome you with all our hearts, comrades and citizens. Your sacrifices and deeds are unparalleled. No enemy overcame you. Only when the foe’s superior numbers and materiel became ever more oppressive did we give up the fight. And we owed it to your heroic valor not to demand pointless sacrifices of you. You manfully withstood all the horrors—men and officers— whether on the chalk cliffs of Champagne, the marshes of Flanders or the Vosges mountains, in inhospitable Russia or the hot South. Year for year, you withstood endless suffering, performed immortal and nearly superhuman deeds, displayed incomparable tests of your unshakeable courage. You defended your homeland against enemy invasions, kept the murder and conflagrations of war far from your wives, children and parents, protected Germany’s fields and workshops from devastation and destruction. For that the homeland thanks you with overflowing hearts. You can return with heads held high. Never have men achieved greater things and suffered more than you have. In the name of the German people’s deeply felt gratitude, I warmly welcome you home once again. You will find our country changed from the one you left behind. New things have arisen, German liberty has emerged. The German people have shaken off the old authorities, who weighed upon all our deeds like a curse. The people have become the masters of their own destiny. It is above all upon you that the hope of German liberty rests. You are the strongest bearers of Germany’s future. No one suffered more than you did from the injustice of the old regime; it was of you we thought when we swept aside a fateful system, it was for you we fought for freedom, for you we won the rights of labor. We cannot receive you with rich gifts, nor offer you comfort and wealth; our unfortunate land has grown poor. The pressure of the victor’s hard demands weighs heavy upon us. But out of this collapse we will build a new Germany, with the hearty strength and

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unshakeable courage that you have maintained a thousand times. Members of all German tribes vied with one another out there in battle, and members of all German tribes stand before us. Shoulder to shoulder you struggled, sacrificed and bled together, looking hardship and death in the eye. Now German unity lies in your hands, ensure that Germany remains unified, that the old particularist misery does not overcome us again, that the old discord does not complete our defeat. Preserve the unity of the German nation by becoming citizens of the one, the indissoluble German Republic! And then work with us to rebuild what has been destroyed. Frequently, while off in battle, obliged to do your grisly duty, yearning drew you back to your peaceful workplace, to your agricultural tasks at home. The socialist republic that welcomes you through me will be a polity of labor. Labor is the religion of socialism, we must work with all our might, with all our dedication, if we are not to perish and degenerate, if we are not to descend into a nation of beggars. You have left the realm of destruction, the gates of new creation open up before you, your energy, your courage, which never wavered in the field, must lead us to a new peacetime happiness. Soon, the longed-for hour of freedom will strike, soon the constituent national assembly will firmly enshrine liberty and the republic, through the inalienable will of the whole German people. You will lay down your weapons that, carried by the sons of the people, should never be a danger to the people, but always their protectors. You should participate in the great work of creating a new German future, the future of our people, whose happiness must be constructed from the ground up by your capable hands. And so, allow me to bring together your loyalty to our homeland, our shared love of German unity, our pride in liberty and the great indivisible German Republic in the following appeal: Our German fatherland, German liberty, the free people's state of Germany—long may it live!

Source of original German text: Friedrich Ebert, "Ansprache an die Heimkehrenden Truppen"; reproduced in *Politische Reden III*, ed. Peter Wende. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994, pp. 94–96.

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