

Decrees against Fraternization (1914/16)

Abstract

With this decree of the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army of November 28, 1914, and the follow-up decree of November 20, 1916, the German Army Command reacted to reports of fraternization among German and enemy soldiers. Tacitly agreed ceasefires, for example, took place even before Christmas 1914 and also occurred afterwards.

Source

Decree of the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army of November 28, 1914

From several communications from the front which have reached us and from newspaper articles it is evident that at certain points in our front line, where friend and foe are particularly close to each other, a kind of fraternization has developed between the two combatants. There are even said to have been agreements to cease firing at each other. In such events lies an extraordinary danger. At all times and in all places, the firm will of each individual to break the enemy with all their strength must not wane under any circumstances. If we want to win—and we want to win and must win—then we must also make it our business to cultivate the fighting spirit of our men. Even static warfare, where it should have come to such a battle at present, must everywhere be aimed at the destruction of the enemy! Events such as those mentioned above are therefore to be monitored closely by the immediate superiors and to be prevented in the most energetic way.

Follow-up decree of November 20, 1916

Reports from the homeland indicate that from conversations of men on leave one often gets the impression that in some places at quiet fronts, where the same units have been facing each other for a long time, there is a certain tacit agreement with the enemy not to shoot at each other since they are “all family men.” Also, in some places where the trenches are only a short distance apart, men are supposed to throw newspapers to each other in a comradely manner.

Even if I do not attach any substantial importance to such talk in the homeland and attribute it mainly to foolish exaggerations by men on leave, they nevertheless circulate, are easily believed and passed on, and give a false picture of the seriousness of the attitude that prevails out in the field.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that during the long duration of the war on quiet fronts, such improprieties do occur behind the backs of superiors and in unobserved moments on the part of some slack and soft people. I therefore ask you again (cf. my letter 28.11.1914 M.J. No. 10406) to prevent any contact with the enemy by taking appropriate sharp measures.

Source: Bayrisches Hauptstaatsarchiv München, Abt. IV (Kriegsarchiv), I, A.K. Bund 96 Erlaß Nr. 10406 and Bund 173 Erlaß Ia 39 904. Reprinted in Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, *Frontalltag im Ersten Weltkrieg. Wahn und Wirklichkeit*. Berlin, 1995, pp. 166–7.

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Recommended Citation: Decrees against Fraternization (1914/16), published in: German History in Documents and Images,

<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:document-5479>> [September 26, 2025].