Parliament Debates the Zabern Affair (1913)

Abstract

Tensions between Germany and France were most evident in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine. Seized by Germany after the Franco-Prussian War, the region became a major administrative headache. Its incorporation into Germany met with widespread hostility from the local population. That the German military was responsible for these residents – but was not in any way accountable to the local legal system – led to conflicts with the local civilian administration and to protests by residents against the German military. In November 1913, an incident involving civilians and a German army unit in the city of Zabern led to the wholesale imprisonment of civilians, quickly prompting a heated *Reichstag* debate about German militarism.

Source

Dr. v. Bethmann Hollweg, Reich Chancellor: […] During a training period, Lieutenant v. Forstner instructed a recruit on what he should do if he were attacked. In view of many serious and sad events of the past few years, the Lieutenant surely had reason to make this the subject of his training period.

(Quite correct! from the right)

[…] Finally, during the training period, the same Lieutenant called Alsatians “Wackes” on three occasions. One recruit had to report to an officer on orders from the non-commissioned officer by saying, “I am a Wackes.”

(Hear, hear! from the Social Democrats)

[…] The Alsatian gentlemen were indeed quite sensitive when I was speaking about the word “Wackes.” But I believe that I am surely not being too presumptuous when I say that the Alsatians should not be more sensitive than the other tribes of our nation.

(Quite correct! from the right)

When speaking about the German, the Alsatian likes to call him a Swabian.

Unfortunately, I cannot imitate the Alsatian dialect, in which this sounds even a little more distinctive.

(Representative Ledebour: Are you ashamed of presenting such rubbish on such a serious matter?! – president’s bell)

President: Representative Ledebour, I call you to order for this interruption!

Dr. v. Bethmann-Hollweg, Reich Chancellor: Gentlemen, I doubt very much that the Alsatian is well-disposed when he speaks of the German as a “Swabian.” But the old Germans don’t get upset about it, any more than we Prussians get upset when, in Bavaria or Saxony, the label “Prussian” is used – in a friendly or not-so friendly manner – to make us understand that we are, in fact, Prussians and not Bavarians or Saxons.

(Laughter)

These distinctions between fellow citizens, gentlemen, are simply in our German blood, and that is why they should not be taken too seriously.

But, gentlemen, be that as it may, the Alsatians felt genuinely insulted by the use of the word. Yet in no way does that provide any justification for the fact that, in the aftermath, officers and troops were actually publicly insulted and mocked.

(Hear, hear! right. – Interjections from the Social Democrats.)

[…] On the other hand, the military authority will consistently and rightfully advocate the position that it cannot accept the insults hurled upon it,

(Bravo! from the right)

and that it cannot do so especially in this case, which was not a single, isolated insult, but, according to what I have told you, a whole series of successive insults.

(Interruption from the left: Continuing provocation of the people!)

Whether violations of criminal laws occurred, whether civil compensation claims can be asserted, this is something the judge must decide. In any case, though, I ask the gentlemen not to forget, even in this serious and in many respects very sad case, that the military has the right to protect itself against direct attacks.

(Shout from the Social Democrats: Children attacked!)

And it has not only the right; it also has the duty to do so.

(Commotion among the Social Democrats.)

Otherwise no army in the world can survive.

(Very true! from the right)

The uniform must be respected under all circumstances.

(Lively approval from the right. – Shouts from the Social Democrats. – Persistent, loud commotion.)

[…]

Source: *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstags*. XIII. Legislaturperiode. I. Session 1913. Stenographic reports, vol. 291 (Berlin, 1914), pp. 6155–57; reprinted in Rüdiger vom Bruch and Björn Hofmeister, eds., *Kaiserreich und Erster Weltkrieg 1871–1918.* Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, vol. 8. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 2000, pp. 316–19.

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