

“Patriotic Enlightenment” (May 10, 1917)

Abstract

By 1917, enthusiasm for the war was waning. Fearing the spread of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), which called for an immediate peace, the German military sought to provide “enlightenment” to soldiers and citizens. The army intensified the program of propaganda among the troops, and directed a campaign of public lectures, films, and other forms of enlightenment on the home front.

Source

In the phase of the war that is now beginning, and which is in every sense *decisive, sustaining the self-sacrificing and confident mood of the population* is the first precondition of success. *The Army’s Supreme Command has therefore decided to promote enlightenment activities at home in tandem with existing organizations, and to consolidate these activities under the unified direction of an Enlightenment Officer in the jurisdictions of each Corps Command.*

Goal.

With the absolute banishment of all contentious political questions, the Enlightenment Office of the Corps Command is to employ all means – press, brochures, pamphlets, lectures, churches, schools, associations, clubs, theaters, movies, etc., to disseminate clarification about the causes and the purpose of this war, to successfully counteract the incitement and disenchantment that exists in many sectors of society, in order to strengthen the confidence and self-sacrifice of the population and to increase understanding about the events of this war. Every German must learn to recognize the reasons that led to this war against Germany, that the war has to do with the existence or destruction of the German people, and that we must particularly hold out in the coming months, in order to gain the prize of victory for three years of sacrifice and privations.

Special Points of Consideration.

The following points are particularly relevant; they assuredly do not represent anything new, but in the field of enlightenment, we may not shy away from repetition. We must hammer the truth repeatedly into the hearts of our fellow citizens: the enemy is suffering from the same problems in the food supply. It is true that that peace is not the equivalent of bread. However, a lessening of the difficulties in the food supply is *not to be expected from a quick peace, only from a good peace*. After the war, the whole world will be hungry, among other things because of the bad harvest throughout the world, but we least of all. But after a bad peace, in which we shall be forced to pay indemnities and lose territory, workers would be unable to pay the high food prices, agriculture would not be able to blossom anew, the economic restraints that the enemy intends to impose would not be removed, and our economic life would not function again. As a result, it is necessary to do without now so we can have something in peacetime. Mutual understanding must be improved between the city and the countryside. Two aspects are especially important here: *influencing the countryside* so that it recognizes the urban population’s need and the necessity to *turn over foodstuffs*, and influencing the urban population so they understand that the productive capacity of the countryside is not unlimited. In order to raise morale, we must exploit our military victories, the activity of our submarines, which all competent observers agree will prove decisive in the coming months, and the knowledge that our battle fleet represents the victorious shield of our unharmed coasts.

Means to the End.

In order to achieve this important goal, all the sectors of the population, all officials, and private organizations must work together in unison, *setting aside all political, economic or confessional antagonisms*. In the course of the war, extraordinarily laudable enlightenment work has been accomplished by the voluntary efforts of private organizations, official agencies, voluntary associations, trade unions, and particularly by the press, the clergy, and the schools. We do not intend in the future to hinder this commendable private activity in any way. The Corps Command is indeed convinced that the primary effect of enlightenment activity is due to the initiative, zeal, and patriotism of individuals.

Cooperation. Reporting to the Corps Command.

However, when so many institutions participate in the enlightenment effort, the danger exists that the work will not be coordinated, so in places the same work will be done twice, while other areas are not worked through at all. The Corps Command requests therefore that it be kept informed of private enlightenment efforts. In order to direct enlightenment in a timely and suitable way, it must be kept informed of the *mood* in the various parts of the land: it therefore seems desirable that the Corps Command be kept up to date about morale and about special incidents, particularly about rumors that might give alarm.

On the other hand, the Corps Command would like to grant its *support and patronage* to all existing and proven organizations within the corps district, *especially by providing suitable enlightenment material, and, when needed, by sending speakers*. In any case, close contact between the various organizations that are active in enlightenment work and the Enlightenment Office of the Corps Command is very desirable.

Enlightenment Materials, the Press.

In the first place, the *press* offers suitable material for enlightenment; from the beginning of the war, the Press Office of the Corps Command has attempted to exploit it for purposes of enlightenment, and the conferences with representatives of the press, which have taken place from time to time, are being constantly made more substantial and comprehensive.

Brochures.

Brochures and pamphlets have also proved to be good media for enlightenment, since with their enlightening statements they reach circles who read newspapers very irregularly, if at all. The Corps Command is happy to deliver brochures (which should be illustrated whenever possible) free of charge when they are needed, and it is accepting suggestions and advice in this regard. Still, one will need to guard against producing too much, because otherwise the danger exists that the brochures will not receive the attention they need. Brochures should not come out of the blue. They are only legitimate if they originate *in response to an urgent, pressing need*.

Speakers.

If *speakers and the topic of the lecture* are chosen correctly, the *spoken word* (if possible in conjunction with authentic visual presentations), are presently the most effective means of enlightenment. The Corps Command is at work recruiting well-known and proven speakers, whose names can be supplied to voluntary associations, official agencies, etc., and who can be made available in case these organizations encounter difficulties in finding qualified speakers on their own. In general, however, it is preferable to recruit personalities who are familiar with *local* conditions and who enjoy the trust of their fellow citizens.

Slides.

Speakers can also have *slides* made available for their lectures. These may be obtained either from the Enlightenment Office of the Corps Command or through the Image and Film Office [*Bild- und Filmamt*] in Berlin, Zimmerstrasse 72/74. The Corps Command asks to be informed as early as possible about requests for speakers, including information about the desired topic and when and where the lecture is to take place. If authorities, voluntary associations, etc., have access to speakers who seem to be particularly qualified to speak outside their local area, we would like to know, so the men in question can be put onto the *list of speakers* that is kept here. The Corps Command will cover the costs for speakers whom it supplies.

Films.

Films, too, can serve effectively the purposes of enlightenment. There are film theaters in almost all the larger provincial towns, in which suitable special showings for clubs, schools, etc., can take place from time to time. Enlightenment films, with an introductory lecture, can likewise be obtained from the Corps Command at no cost.

Church.

Throughout the war, the *clergy* of all confessions have already worked in exemplary fashion on behalf of enlightenment. Closer contact between the Corps Command and the clergy would certainly make this enlightenment activity even more fruitful. The military enlightenment activity could learn from the experiences of the clergy, and clergymen could in turn draw from the rich materials offered by military agencies and extend their activity – beyond matters of feeding the population, the need for cooperation between the city and the countryside, between producers and consumers, [and] promoting war bonds – to questions like the cause of the war and the need to stay the course until victory.

School.

The schools have already contributed to a great degree to increasing the population's understanding of many of the difficulties in our war economy. Furthermore, to mention only one practical example, they have – working together with the clergy – undertaken praiseworthy, practical work by means of their enlightenment activity in finding lodging in the countryside for urban children. Enlightenment in the schools is so important because it affects parents through their children. In some areas the schools have been very successful in setting up so-called “*parents' evenings*.”

Parents' Evenings.

The Corps Command would be grateful if school authorities would continue to promote the development of these events.

Voluntary Relief Committees.

In many localities there already exist *voluntary associations*, under the name of the “Patriotic Lecture Association,” “Welfare Committee,” and the like, which have distinguished themselves in raising morale and enlightening the populace; these organizations should naturally continue to exist. On a case-to-case basis, it must be asked whether their composition is comprehensive enough to generate the confidence necessary within the broad population, or whether one might co-opt new members, in order to bring together in these organizations *all classes of the people, all parties and all confessions, employers and employees, men and women* in cooperative, fruitful work.

Cooperation with Women.

Women of all classes, who in this war have had to carry a special measure of worries, burdens, privations and sacrifices, deserve consideration above all in our efforts. The Corps Command will therefore be happy if it were able to enlist the cooperation of *women's organizations* for purpose of enlightenment.

Commemorative Celebrations.

Celebrations of great military victories offer voluntary auxiliary committees welcome opportunities to undertake enlightenment activity. Hopefully the opportunity will arise again in the near future for such events. The Enlightenment Officer of the Corps Command is particularly interested in having these voluntary associations take the occasion of 31 May to commemorate the Battle of Skagerrak [Jutland] in a simple ceremony, in keeping with the gravity of the times. The German people must be made aware that without the victory at Skagerrak – that is to say, without the victorious defense of our unharmed coasts – our submarine warfare against England would not be possible. The historical significance of this day in the war against England must be given special emphasis.

Word-of-Mouth Efforts by Our Agents.

Even more important than these kinds of enlightenment is *influencing people by word-of-mouth efforts, from man to man, face to face*. We would like to win as large a number of suitable people as possible, who would be active as *agents of enlightenment* in the army corps district and who would circulate materials supplied by us into the smallest popular channels. The principal candidates would be people who have already been successful in agitating on behalf of war bonds.

Difficulties.

The field of activity that lies before us is extensive and difficult. The length of the war, the unprecedented demands that the war has made on each and every one, especially the difficulties concerning the food situation, which have been imposed on us by the English blockade, mean a *very severe psychological test*. The petty daily encounter with economic worries has made many of us tired and discouraged. The fire of enthusiasm has gone out for many. Egoism is becoming more pronounced, as it does in all times of danger. A certain nervousness about the war has taken hold of people and is restraining cheerful cooperation among all for the good of the whole. On top of this, the required conversion of our economy for war entails many difficulties and restraints, which do not always seem reasonable to the people and thus create unnecessary bitterness. New regulations are issued continually, in order to keep the machinery of our war economy going. What is proper today, is no longer so tomorrow. The authorities are not for the most part to blame; instead, the problem lies in the circumstances. On the one hand, there are innumerable opportunities to earn a great deal of money in a shady way, and on the other hand, shortage and anxiety lend a willing ear to unscrupulous insinuations. In this situation we need to enlighten, strengthen, advise, and help.

Morale.

In spite of a yearning for peace that is only too understandable after three years of sacrifice and deprivation, the morale of our people is quite good. Still, regardless of some distressing minor phenomena, which life presents to us at this time, the full achievement of our German people appears to be immense. We are still too close to events to judge the full extent of this achievement.

Cooperation among all Sectors of Society.

Our *enlightenment activity is addressed to all sectors of society*, whether high or low, rich or poor. It is to strengthen again the will to sacrifice everywhere, to counter unjustified criticism, to sustain belief in the best intentions of our authorities, to spread the truth. Above all, we wish in our enlightenment work to point out again and again that the guilty party for our domestic difficulties is sitting across the canal on

the British Isles. Our enlightenment work is addressed to all sectors of society, but it can fulfill its task only when it is *promoted by all sectors of society; it cannot come from without; we need the cheerful participation of everyone.*

Enlightenment as a Means of Waging War.

If the Supreme Command has now decided to promote enlightenment activities at home, it has done so not because it worries that our people will not persevere in the coming decisive months. Even without the work of enlightenment, we would get through the next months. However, the Supreme Command has recognized that the morale of the population is a very effective *means of waging the war*, and thus it is now harnessing the moral powers of the people in order to strengthen the force of all facets of our war effort during the final battle, in the sense that Hindenburg meant when he invoked the “*Furor teutonicus*.” Properly conducted, enlightenment will facilitate perseverance; it will remove much of the people’s suspicion, it will free our public life of much unnecessary tension and inhibition. If mutual understanding grows by virtue of our enlightenment work, if the barriers that fell as if by magic at the beginning of the war – barriers that we now, in the third year of the war, see being erected again in misunderstanding, malevolence, and mistrust among sectors of the populace – if these barriers break down, then our enlightenment work will not only contribute to securing victory, but it will also and above all accomplish valuable preliminary work for the critical *period of demobilization*, in which new and important goals will confront the enlightenment effort. All those who are active in the enlightenment should thus dedicate themselves to becoming, as it were, *commissioners of the transitional economy of the spirit*. If we go at our work in this spirit we will be successful. Then for us, too, *Hindenburg’s* promise will be fulfilled: “*If the army on the home front holds out, we are certain of victory!*”

Source: Richtlinien für die Aufklärungs- und Propagandatätigkeit im Bereich des stellv. Generalkommandos des X. AK., Hanover, May 10, 1917, Abt. II b 1 B. No. 1649 S, confidential! – Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart, XIII AK, Abt. II, Vol. 69; reprinted in Wilhelm Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914–1918*. 2 volumes. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 816–22.

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