

Reichstag President Johannes Kaempf, Speech on the Outbreak of War (August 4, 1914)

Abstract

The banker and left-liberal politician Johannes Kaempf (1842-1918) was a member of the *Freisinnige Volkspartei* [Liberal People's Party], which became the *Fortschrittliche Volkspartei* [Progressive People's Party] in 1910. He had been a member of the Reichstag since 1903 and was elected its president in 1912. In this position he presided over parliamentary proceedings until his death in 1918. On August 4, 1914, Kaempf gave this speech in the Reichstag after Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg had described the German government's view of the events leading up to the outbreak of war (often referred to as the July crisis). By this time, Austria-Hungary had already declared war on Serbia, and Germany was at war with Russia and France. German troops had invaded the neutral states of Luxembourg and Belgium in violation of international law in order to implement the Schlieffen Plan. At this point, the German government still hoped that Great Britain would remain neutral, but it would declare war on Germany late in the evening of August 4, several hours after the Reichstag session in which Kaempf delivered this speech.

However, this sound recording was not made in the Reichstag on that day (as this was not yet technically possible in 1914) but four years later, on January 22, 1918, by the Prussian State Library. In 1917 the audio department of the State Library began to make studio recordings of important speeches by leading politicians and other prominent figures for its collection. In his original 1914 speech, which Kaempf re-read for this recording in 1918, he claims that the war had been forced upon Germany and was therefore a defensive war (against Russia and France) – an interpretation of events shared by most German politicians and public opinion. As Kaempf notes, even the SPD members of parliament, who generally pursued an anti-militaristic and internationalist peace policy, had decided to support Germany's war effort and approve the necessary war credits as even they had come to believe they were supporting a war fought for national defense. In the speech itself, Kaempf calls the war “defensive” several times, but also calls it a “struggle for spiritual values.” He references the “enthusiasm” and “unity” among the German people, and uses phrases that seem to echo older patriotic songs such as *Die Wacht am Rhein*.

Source

¶Gentlemen, the gravity of the situation, about which none of us can any longer be in any doubt, has been expressed in its full extent and severity in the remarks made by the Reich Chancellor.

We are facing powerful enemies who threaten us from the right and the left, who have invaded our borders without a declaration of war and forced us to fight to defend our fatherland.

We are aware that the war we are forced to wage is a defensive battle, but at the same time it is a battle for Germany's highest spiritual and material treasures, a battle for life and death, a battle for our very existence.

The hour in which the Reichstag is preparing, in the face of the outbreak of war, to vote on the laws that are intended to provide a secure foundation for the war and for the economic life of the nation during the war, is a solemn and deeply serious hour, but at the same time an hour of infinite greatness and exaltation.

Heavy burdens must be imposed on the entire people, and heavy sacrifices must be demanded of each individual. But there is no one in the entire German Empire who does not fully understand what is at stake and who is not willing to gladly take on these burdens and make these sacrifices for the Fatherland.

The enthusiasm that is sweeping through the entire country like a storm is proof that the entire German people are willing to sacrifice their property and their lives for the honor of the German name.

Never has our entire nation been more united than it is today. Even those who otherwise profess themselves to be opponents of war are rushing to the colors, and their representatives in the Reichstag are approving without delay the measures necessary for the defense of the country. The entire German people thus stands united and brotherly to avenge the injustice done to us and to defend us in the war imposed upon us.

We know that we are at one with our allied governments in this. All of us, governments and people alike, have only one thought: the honor, welfare, and greatness of Germany!

Thus, conscious of its strength, the people take up arms and march forth into the holy struggle, old and young alike, imbued with the same enthusiasm. The old German fighting spirit flashes in the eyes of our brothers and our sons.

Level-headed and with iron determination, and therefore confident of victory, we watch the leadership of our army and navy at their great work.

And all this—the unity of the entire nation, the strength of the people in arms, the cool-headedness of the army and navy leadership—guarantees us victory in the battle we are fighting in the knowledge that our cause is just, for the defense of the honor and greatness of our fatherland.

Source: Johannes Kaempf, Reichstag Speech, August 4, 1914. Recording date: January 22, 1918.
Stiftung Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv

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