

Wilhelm II: “Hun Speech” (1900)

Abstract

Wilhelm II delivered this speech in Bremerhaven on July 27, 1900. He was addressing German troops who were departing to suppress the Boxer rebellion in China. The speech is infused by Wilhelm's fiery and chauvinistic rhetoric and clearly expresses his vision of German imperial power. There were two versions of the speech. The Foreign Office issued an edited version, making sure to omit one particularly incendiary paragraph that they regarded as diplomatically embarrassing. The “official” version of the speech appears here, but the troubling passage has been added at the end.

Source

Bremerhaven, July 27, 1900

“Great overseas tasks have fallen to the new German Empire, tasks far greater than many of my countrymen expected. The German Empire has, by its very character, the obligation to assist its citizens if they are being set upon in foreign lands. The tasks that the old Roman Empire of the German nation was unable to accomplish, the new German Empire is in a position to fulfill. The means that make this possible is our army.

It has been built up during thirty years of faithful, peaceful labor, following the principles of my blessed grandfather. You, too, have received your training in accordance with these principles, and by putting them to the test before the enemy, you should see whether they have proved their worth in you. Your comrades in the navy have already passed this test; they have shown that the principles of your training are sound, and I am also proud of the praise that your comrades have earned over there from foreign leaders. It is up to you to emulate them.

A great task awaits you: you are to revenge the grievous injustice that has been done. The Chinese have overturned the law of nations; they have mocked the sacredness of the envoy, the duties of hospitality in a way unheard of in world history. It is all the more outrageous that this crime has been committed by a nation that takes pride in its ancient culture. Show the old Prussian virtue. Present yourselves as Christians in the cheerful endurance of suffering. May honor and glory follow your banners and arms. Give the whole world an example of manliness and discipline.

You know full well that you are to fight against a cunning, brave, well-armed, and cruel enemy. When you encounter him, know this: no quarter will be given. Prisoners will not be taken. Exercise your arms such that for a thousand years no Chinese will dare to look cross-eyed at a German. Maintain discipline. May God's blessing be with you, the prayers of an entire nation and my good wishes go with you, each and every one. Open the way to civilization once and for all! Now you may depart! Farewell, comrades!”

The unofficial but correct version of the crucial passage reads as follows:

“Should you encounter the enemy, he will be defeated! No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken! Whoever falls into your hands is forfeited. Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German.”

Source: Johannes Prenzler, ed. *Die Reden Kaiser Wilhelms II.* 4 volumes. Leipzig, n.d., 2. pp. 209–12; reprinted in Manfred Görtemaker, *Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert. Entwicklungslinien*, Opladen 1996. Schriftenreihe der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, vol. 274, p. 357.

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