



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Wilhelm II: The Swearing-In of Recruits in Potsdam (1891)

In the monarchical system of Wilhelmine Germany, the army was regarded as an extension of Kaiser Wilhelm II's own power, and he was legally the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. His speech to recruits illustrates the conservative Prussian vision of a Christian state unified by the monarch. The army was used to combat domestic unrest when necessary.

Recruits of my Regiment of Guards!

You have been drawn together here from all corners of my realm to fulfill your military service, and in a sacred place you have just sworn to your Emperor loyalty unto your dying breath. You are still too young to understand all of this, but you will slowly be made to grasp what it means. Do not imagine all of this as too difficult and trust in God; now and then say the Lord's Prayer – it has many a time restored a soldier's courage.

Children of my Guards, as of this day you have become part of my army, you are now under my command, and you have the privilege of being allowed to wear my colors. Wear them with honor. Remember the glorious history of our Fatherland; remember that the German army must be armed and ready for enemies both domestic and foreign. More so than ever before, unbelief and discontent are rearing their heads in the Fatherland, *and you may have to shoot or bayonet your own kin and brothers*. In that case, seal the loyalty with the sacrifice of your heart's blood. Now go home and do your duty.

These were the words of the Emperor according to the *Breslauer Lokalanzeiger* [*Breslau Local Gazette*] of December 8, 1891. According to the *Neißer Zeitung* [*Neißer Newspaper*], his speech was as follows:

Recruits!

You have now sworn loyalty to me before this consecrated servant of God and in front of this altar. You are still too young to understand the true meaning of what has just been spoken, but for now strive to always follow the rules and teachings you have been given. You have sworn loyalty to me, which – children of my Guards – means you are now my soldiers, you have committed yourselves to me body and soul; *there is for you only one enemy, and that is my enemy. Given the current subversive activities of the socialists, it could happen that I order you to shoot down your own kin, brothers, indeed, parents – God forbid it should come to pass – but even then you must follow my orders without grumbling.*

Source: Ernst Johann, *Reden des Kaisers. Ansprachen, Predigten, und Trinksprüche Wilhelms II* [*The Kaiser's Speeches: Addresses, Preachings, and Toasts by Wilhelm II*]. Munich, 1966. pp. 55-56.

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