



Volume 4: Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890 Bourgeois Society and the Officer Corps (1883)

The exaggerated deference shown to officers in Bismarckian and Wilhelmine society became a mounting source of irritation for bourgeois critics of the military. Stiff-backed, thick-necked, empty-headed officers were regularly skewered in the pages of satirical journals such as *Kladderadatsch* and *Simplicissimus*, which were displayed openly, even with pride, on middle-class coffee tables. Rigidity was comical, and laughter was its punishment. But lampooning the arrogant behavior of officers did not necessarily translate into a deeper questioning of authoritarian values. As this commentator observes in 1883, German burghers felt disadvantaged by the preferential treatment officers enjoyed, but they exacerbated the problem by addressing officers with inflated titles that were often withheld from deserving civilians.

The officer is granted the most far-reaching privileges by the public, by the entire civilian population. One does not know where to begin, whether with the waiter, who usually addresses the officer, in contrast to civilians, in the royal plural, “the captain wish or command, etc.”; whether with conductors, who take delight in assigning good seats and less crowded compartments to officers, often to the disadvantage of the other travelers; whether with the senior civil servants, who treat officers with particular politeness; whether with the ladies, whose enthusiasm for the lieutenant seems to be hereditary; or with the shopkeeper, who insists on attaching to the officer the title “Your Honorable,” while at the same time denying this formal address even to senior civil servants. And the other day some educated citizen, who thought it quite natural that even the youngest 19-year-old lieutenant should be “Your Honorable,” asked in all seriousness whether it was legitimate to call the head of a district court “Honorable.” One should note here in passing that officially and by law certainly not every officer can lay claim to the title of “Honorable”; actually, only field officers at the level of senior officials 4th class may do so.

In their effort to pay homage to officers, all classes compete with one another – high and low, rich and poor. Most people do it unconsciously. Some feel that this kind of preferential treatment is not right and even resolve to bring about a change; yet as soon as they come into contact with the officers, all their good resolutions usually evaporate. Even the fledgling officer, the young cadet, enjoys this special distinction: often as early as age ten or twelve he has become accustomed to being addressed with the formal “Sie” by civilians. To address a boy of the same age in civilian clothes in this way would be considered ridiculous; however, a cadet is something really special: he will become an officer a few years down the road, at which time he will receive boundless distinction.

Source: *Die Vorrechte der Offiziere im Staate und in der Gesellschaft* [*The Privileges of Officers in State and Society*], 7th part. Berlin, 1883, pp. 25-26.

Original German text reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871-1914* [*Source Materials on Everyday Life in Germany 1871-1914*]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, p. 76.

Translation: Erwin Fink