



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918

The Nationalists Mobilize on Behalf of the Army: An Appeal by the German Army League
(February 1912)

The German Army League [*Deutscher Wehrverein*] was founded to promote the expansion of the German army. It had a loud voice in the parliamentary debates of 1912 and 1913, during which significant increases in the size of the German army were decided upon. These increases, however, highlighted Germany's growing budgetary difficulties, for they could only be funded with an enormous direct levy on capital gains—a measure that Conservatives had long resisted but which now enjoyed the support of the Socialists in the Reichstag.

The German Army League [*Deutscher Wehrverein*] was founded on January 28 in Berlin. The 700 individuals who have already registered to join and the 500 local chapters that are currently being set up testify to the fact that a broad cross-section of the German populace perceives the league as a national necessity. Without a doubt, all this was influenced by the growing conviction that, in view of the current international situation, it is urgently necessary to strengthen our armed forces, particularly the army, since Germany's fate in the next war will be decided primarily on land. A lost war will have incalculable economic, political, and social consequences. These possibilities were previously ignored, since the nation, focused on the successes of 1870-71, had overlooked the fact that world politics and military conditions have changed over the years to Germany's detriment. In the interests of the nation, though, one cannot tolerate a national proclivity toward self-deceit in crucial matters. In his speech to the German people one hundred years ago, Fichte called this "a cowardly escape from one's own thoughts." In the eyes of the Fatherland's concerned friends, these thoughts comprise the inner life and character of our people. There are forces at work here that want to loosen the structure of the nation, undermine our military prowess, place us at the mercy of a materialistic ideology, and convince us that national pride and the love of the Fatherland are obsolete concepts—all in pursuit of the dream of world peace and international brotherhood. It is time to mount a defense against these forces; and this is why the statutes of the German Army League state: "The association endeavors to strengthen patriotism and to preserve the manly spirit of the German nation." This is followed by the sentence: "In particular, it is committed to making the Germany army so strong in terms of both internal cohesion and size that it will always be able to protect the Reich and safeguard its international power."

But this absolute security is no longer guaranteed if one considers that Germany, due to its unfavorable geographic and strategic location, could be threatened from all sides in the next war, which would result in an extraordinarily difficult military situation. It is imperative to restore the confidence that existed a few years ago and to make it a strong pillar of our foreign policy. Yet, like the belief in our superiority abroad, we can only restore this confidence if, in peacetime, we shrink from no sacrifice or effort to bolster our military. No time must be lost, for a military

law will soon be introduced in France that will strengthen the French army. In the event of war, France has more trained soldiers than Germany, although it has 26 million fewer inhabitants.

With only 0.94 percent of our population in the military, we have not been able to claim the glory of being a “nation in arms” for some time now. For its part, France has 1.4 percent of the population under arms, and in the event of war, it will have almost twice as many soldiers as Germany when measured as a percentage of the population. On top of this, some of the main branches of its military are better organized. These and many other facts remain largely unknown to the German people, even in those circles which have a duty to take such matters seriously. As for the Triple Alliance, it must be noted that the size of peacetime forces in Russia and France exceeds those in Germany and Austria-Hungary by some 700,000 men—in the event of a war, by some two million trained soldiers. Our ally Austria-Hungary has not significantly increased the size of its army in the last thirty years.

In view of such facts, to bury one’s head in the sand would be to commit a sin against the nation. It is a national duty to educate the German people in these matters, just as the Naval League once successfully campaigned on behalf of the navy. The German Army League is dedicating itself to this very task. It has a duty to point out to the nation that, even in peacetime, it must make sacrifices to strengthen its army and to keep it in top form in terms of size, organization, and tactics. The league must call attention to the fact that the financial burden imposed on Germany by the maintenance of its armed forces is less than the burden in other large states, and that complaints about oppressive taxes, partially the doing of party politics, are unfounded in light of our growing prosperity. Germany’s national income today already surpasses that of France, and it is growing more rapidly, too. Aside from causing inexpressible misery and hardship, a lost war would cost huge sums, and the interest payments on these sums alone would be equal to our entire annual army budget.

At the moment, the German Army League believes its primary task lies in supporting the government in its efforts to educate the public on the urgent necessity of the upcoming military bill. On top of this, the league wants to strengthen the conviction that defense issues have nothing to do with party politics—a self-evident truth in other countries. This goal was kept in mind when the German Army League’s commission was formed. By and large, these are the salient points that have made it necessary—in the interests of both the army and the Fatherland—to establish a German Army League as an organization that is and will remain independent in every way and that includes all groups and classes of our nation, regardless of party affiliation and denomination. But the German Army League can only perform its vital tasks and achieve its important goals if its members have the drive, zeal, and selflessness needed to rouse and admonish the nation. This will ensure that it has a powerful effect on the public, for the purpose of protecting the Fatherland and keeping our enemies in check!

Source: „Aufruf des Deutschen Wehrvereins“ [“An Appeal by the German Army League”], *Hamburger Nachrichten*, No. 84 (February 20, 1912).

Original German text reprinted in Volker R. Berghahn and Wilhelm Deist, *Rüstung im Zeichen der wilhelminischen Weltpolitik: Grundlegende Dokumente [Armament within the Context of Wilhelmine Global Politics: Key Documents 1890-1914]*. Dusseldorf, 1988, pp. 231-33.

Translation: Adam Blauhut