

Address given by Theodor Blank at the appointment of the first volunteers for the Bundeswehr (12 November 1955)

Caption: On 12 November 1955, Theodor Blank, Federal Defence Minister, gives an address in Bonn to mark the appointment of the first volunteers for the Bundeswehr.

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Address given by Theodor Blank (12 November 1955)

Gentlemen,

If, today, we have interrupted our work routine for a short time to assemble here in this simple building, it is certainly not because we crave pomp and ceremony! We are very aware of the gravity of this moment, when our defence contribution has become a reality and is now being demonstrated to the public by the appointment of the first new German soldiers. We want to turn this moment into a time of reflection — reflection that is now so rare for us in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, and yet so salutary.

We do not want to digress into retrospective consideration of the years of preparation and the many disappointments and difficulties that lie behind us. We want to direct our thoughts towards the future, towards the part of our chosen course that will certainly not be the easier one, and that begins now, when actual practice, with all its foreseen and unforeseen problems, will put our planning to the test. Here, we should not lose sight of the fact that our responsibility is increased to the extent that these plans are being put into effect by human beings with all their strengths and weaknesses.

We bear this responsibility towards the young citizens who will in future be entrusted to us, towards the entire German people and towards the nations who are our allies and who have taken us into their community, who also protect us and to whose protection we ourselves shall contribute. This moment today should, therefore, also be a visible expression of our determination to assume both equal rights and equal obligations in this community — not only in order to fulfil treaties that have been concluded but also because we are convinced that our defence contribution is just as vital for us as for the entire community.

The German defence contribution will now take shape to an ever-increasing extent, beginning with the sections and training courses that are being created on the basis of legislation governing volunteer soldiers. Each day will take us a step further on the journey, at the end of which lies the goal of a secure Europe and a life enjoyed in peace and freedom. It will now be possible for the cooperation with the partner states that has already been tried out in the political arena to be intensified in the military sphere as well, when soldiers come into personal contact with members of the forces of other nations at joint bases or during joint exercises.

We want to be quite clear about the fact that the creation of our armed forces, as it is being demonstrated today, is a task requiring not only organisation and technology. To a very decisive extent, it will depend on the *people* and on the spirit in which these people approach their task. Here, the awareness of our common fate with other nations, the determination to achieve international cooperation, is just as important as the spirit within our future troops that has to be the living expression of our system of freedom.

Our ideas about the internal structure of the new armed forces have been reflected in numerous regulations and planning instructions. Now they have to be put into practice with great determination. The leaders with responsibility at all levels now face a task here that will be posed anew every day in the exercise of their duty. It will be possible to perform this task only if we can display confidence and patience towards the young people entrusted to us and also work to improve ourselves.

However, it should be made clear that the spirit and the style of the troops are not only shaped by the leaders but also by the led. Later, when the first conscripts to move into the barracks follow the volunteers, they should respond to this confidence by being prepared to form their own judgement from their own experience in a rational fashion. It is only out of this that mutual trust can then develop. It is only then that something new can arise from the rubble of the old, something that will be in keeping with our changed social, political and spiritual situation.

When we go along new paths, we also, of course, have to have regard for the lessons of our military past. We want to look at this past coolly and without prejudice, not to be biased in glorifying it or condemning it, but also not to adopt any aspect without reviewing if it is still appropriate for the present times.

As you are aware, there is a historical parallel to this spiritual situation of the soldier of today. Let us take a moment here to look back again at issues from the past that may, at the same time, provide us with a signpost to the future.

Today is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Scharnhorst, who voiced the demand that was in tune with the situation of his day to 'unite the army and the nation more profoundly'. It was in this link between the nation and the army that Scharnhorst wanted something that was still new in his day, in his words 'to raise and invigorate the spirit of the army'. He studied the internal processes of his era, just as we attempt to understand the signs of our era. Then he employed his indefatigable and enormous inner strength to ensure that his ideas prevailed against the many opposing forces around him. In these endeavours, he always had regard for the totality of the national community and was able to adapt his military reforms to parallel political endeavours.

Today, we have to install an element into our reconstructed state that has been missing for 10 years, and that is the element of defence. It is true that Scharnhorst's activities cannot give us the ready-made and sacrosanct solution, but it can point us in the right direction. The need continuously to review military matters and to adjust them provisionally to the general circumstances of the time is expressed in his forward-looking statement: 'The tradition in the army must be to march at the head of progress.'

In view of the tasks that face us, however, we must also not forget that, some years after the Congress of Vienna, Scharnhorst's achievements suffered considerable setbacks as a result of forces that were unable to break free from the past. This development constitutes a very emphatic warning to us, to continue along the path we have taken and not to allow ourselves to be deflected from it.

Looking back and looking forwards are still not sufficient to demonstrate the vast amount of organisational and technical attention to detail that has had to accompany the efforts for spiritual renewal and which must continue to do so in the future. Scharnhorst was also, of course, not just a spiritual reformer, he was also a cool-headed planner, calculator and organiser who never lost sight of these aspects when implementing his plans. In fact, these tasks have gained in importance particularly in our present technological age. Today, therefore, I want to thank *all* members of the civilian and military departments of my Ministry, who have very often gone beyond the call of duty in carrying out their individual tasks over the past few months and years. Everyone was working on the same project, and it was initially impossible to foresee when it would finally be completed. For the former soldiers, the majority of whom have given up secure civilian posts, there was also the additional issue of the uncertainty of their personal futures.

Although, in spite of everything, I can only present certificates of appointment to some people today, you will realise that this is only for procedural reasons and does not reflect any assessment that has been made. However, it was important to me to choose this particular day of commemoration for our new beginning. You, gentlemen, stand here before me as representatives of your remaining comrades.

My thanks go to all those who work in my Ministry, and I do not intend to conclude without making special reference to General Heusinger and General Speidel, who have been my closest military advisers and shared the heavy responsibility with me over the years.

Others among you, gentlemen, have not, to date, worked in the Ministry but are becoming voluntary soldiers directly from civilian professions — the first of thousands who will follow you. It is to you that I make my first request, that you should justify your selection by making an honest attempt to work your way into the ideas and conceptions of the Ministry, not only at a purely professional level. I am aware that, in the onslaught of the daily duties that await you, it will be even harder for you to give serious consideration to the fundamental problems than has been the case to date. You and all those who come after you, however, should clearly recognise the huge significance of this aspect of your work and adopt a positive attitude towards it. It will be the responsibility of your superiors to give you the opportunity to consider these questions as well. The military leader of the future will be able to set an example as a citizen in uniform to his young soldiers only if he is *more* than just a military expert.

The soldier is an equal partner in the state system and affirms his subordination to political leadership, something that also applies in the same way to all other arms of the national executive. He does not wish to be any more or any less than other sections of the nation, for whose protection against external threats he is responsible. If the national community, for its part, is prepared to accommodate the will of the soldier to be integrated and to approach him not with mistrust but with guarded confidence, then there will not be a danger that the armed forces either retreat into isolation or are forced into isolation. However, it will also be only then that these future German troops will have the inward and outward strength to fulfil the task entrusted to them by the political leadership: that is, to contribute to securing peace by raising their preparedness to defend. It is only in this that we can make sense of the existence of the military.