

Appeal to the Wehrmacht
Draft, summer 1944

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Soldiers!

You have fought bravely for four years, undaunted by death, without ever failing, defying every danger, heedless of every effort and suffering, imbued with an iron sense of duty and fervent love of the people and the fatherland. No task was too hard for you, no sacrifice too great. You went into battle filled with the belief that the war was just and necessary to recompense the injustice that arose after the First World War and to secure our freedom. You have done great deeds on land, in the air and at sea, and pinned the laurels of invincibility to your banners. And yet there is no foreseeable end to the war. Your return to your wife and children, to your house and home, to peaceful work, seems to have been postponed to the distant future. You will have asked yourselves often enough what the reason is. You have not found an answer. Your view has been clouded by propaganda that does not shrink from any kind of lie and gambles unscrupulously with your heroic courage and your life. In fact, the answer is clear and simple. A government that no longer sees politics as the art of the possible and does not strive to achieve its goals with the most economical deployment of forces but indulges in fanciful plans of boundless conquests, a government that does not acknowledge any kind of moral obligations, neither its own nor those related to any other nation, can never achieve peace with other nations. Your commanders are unable to do anything to change this; with a government like this, all they get are yet more inordinate wishes. Instead of judiciously limiting its policy to the real existential needs of our people, the government is pursuing the subjugation of almost the entire continent under the pretext of restructuring Europe. The defeated nations are being enslaved and exploited instead of winning their support by judicious consideration for their national pride, their will to freedom and their existential interests, and instead of building bridges to a lasting agreement. The government has ignored the clear lessons of history that condemn such courses of action to failure, and has sowed hate everywhere instead of trust. In doing this it has heedlessly obstructed the path to a rapid and lasting peace.

We do not wish to enslave other nations. The freedom that our fathers won for Germany in the last century as the most precious asset of national life, and which we have to protect with equal passion, must be granted to every other nation. For only on this basis can we bridge the chasm created by uncontrolled, power-drunk policies. There is yet another factor that threatens to rob you of the success of the victories you have won under the leadership of trained, experienced men: Hitler's "genius as a general", which he has arrogated to himself in lunatic blindness and which is idolized by toadies in the most repulsive way. Anybody who wants to resole a boot has to have learned the shoemaker's trade. Anybody who wants to lead an army of millions has to have learned the skills required on the different rungs of hard military service and has to have proved his ability. Since Hitler conferred the supreme command on himself in the winter of 1941-42, obstinacy, incapability and uncontrollability have brought the Wehrmacht into situations that experts had warned against and that have cost avoidable and immense sacrifice. The defeat of the VIth Army near Stalingrad, the collapse of the rash enterprise in North Africa and the futile sacrifice in Sicily are uniquely and solely attributable to incapability,

unscrupulous leadership. Hundreds of thousands of brave soldiers have paid penance for the arrogance and vanity of an individual with their life, health or loss of freedom. With merciless lack of feeling, this leadership has brought unspeakable suffering to countless families, suffering that could have been avoided. Many high-ranking leaders have already resigned; some have taken their own lives because they did not want to bear the responsibility for such an unscrupulous, incapable leadership. Others were eliminated because they had the courage to speak out in warning to spare the waste of precious blood. Never before in German history has a military leadership so unscrupulously flouted the noble institution of universal conscription and the trust of its soldiers. While you are fighting far from home to defend the home country, many German cities that Göring boasted he could surely defend have been submerged in rubble and ashes. Irreplaceable cultural works, innumerable workplaces and hundreds of thousands of homes have been destroyed; numerous families of brave soldiers have been killed and extinguished forever. Never before have such terrible things occurred in the German fatherland.

Soldiers! It cannot go on like this! It cannot be that you come home sometime to a field of rubble where young people, robbed of your parental guidance, are losing their souls along with their home country and their family home, where material desires are threatening to stifle every noble feeling of honor and freedom, human dignity and brotherly love. Do you want the sacred order of decency and morals to be destroyed by sin and vice? Do you want young people to end up cursing us because we did not summon up the courage in time to take responsibility for saving our fatherland? Maybe we have already hesitated too long, but we dare not wait any longer, because the most unscrupulous blow is already being prepared – to make the leaders of the Wehrmacht responsible for the whole disaster. We have to act because – and this seems the hardest thing – crimes are being committed in your rear that stain the shield of honor of the German nation and damage the good reputation it has earned in the world. Autocratic minions in high and most senior positions have sanctioned or even personally perpetrated these crimes. They have shamelessly exploited the war for their own profit at the cost of their own people and foreign nations and to benefit from the neediness of the poor and the distress of the unfortunate. These men have not shrunk from boasting about the fame of your heroic deeds without ever having felt the war in their own lives. You will be given the details. We will prosecute with the utmost rigor in public trials. The worst is that these shameless actions are ordered or sanctioned by Adolf Hitler. A leadership of this kind, whether insane or fully responsible, has forfeited its claim to obedience before God and man because it has broken the oath to the fatherland it once swore, by which it is bound like any other citizen, and has thus trampled on the loyalty due to those who take the oath. It can only steer the people and the fatherland towards a truly terrible disaster. We are absolutely determined to prevent it. We are answering to God for this. We are pledging you to this. Consequently, with the agreement of your longest-serving military leaders and my colleagues, I have assumed the political and military leadership. I am relying on your trust. Eminent men from every class in the nation have given their consent

and pledge selfless obedience and loyalty. I will take the necessary steps to ensure that the leadership and administration everywhere is safe in the hands of proficient men of blameless character.

Soldiers! The time has not yet come to cherish thoughts of peace. We still have to fight to defend and rescue what is dear to us until we have secured an honorable outcome of the war. But I can already promise you many things:

Firstly: We will demand of you only those sacrifices that we have carefully determined to be absolutely necessary to defend us and bring the war to a satisfactory end.

Secondly: Trustworthy, proficient German men will do their utmost to achieve a lasting agreement with all nations that will secure our future.

Thirdly: In your rear and under your protection we will once again be governed by law and justice, decency and uprightness, proficiency and selfless fulfillment of duty.

Fourthly: After the war the entire people will put its energy into building homes, producing household goods and food and creating a truly social communal life. Calm, serious work should be a clear goal in our lives. We will all have to work hard and live simply, but in return we will regain strength and enrich our souls.

I trust that the front and our home country, with everybody united in collective strength, will continue to do their duty to the utmost in humility before God, for honor and freedom, for the people and the fatherland.

German soldiers!

Over four years of extremely brave struggle lie behind you! Millions of our comrades have fallen on the battlefields of Europe and Africa, in the skies and on the seas.

Hitler's unscrupulous leadership has sacrificed entire armies with the flower of our youth in Russia and the Mediterranean for fanciful plans of boundless conquest. The irresponsible deployment of the VIth Army near Stalingrad and its meaningless sacrifice show the cruel truth in a harsh light. Capable officers who opposed these insane actions have been removed; the General Staff has been pushed aside. For all your heroism, Hitler's arrogant claim to be a brilliant general is driving us towards a fateful conclusion. At home in Germany the sites of family life and work are increasingly being destroyed; 6 million Germans are already homeless. In your rear, corruption and crime that Hitler tolerated, or even ordered from the start, are reaching unprecedented dimensions.

In this hour of greatest need and danger, German men have done their duty to God and the people; they have taken action and given Germany an experienced leadership conscious of its responsibility.

The man who gave timely warning, who resolutely opposed this war and was consequently dismissed by Hitler, is [Ludwig Beck]. He is now the interim leader of the German Reich and has assumed supreme command of the German Wehrmacht. The government consists of experienced men from every class of our people, every part of our fatherland. It has set to work. I have been entrusted with the supreme command of the entire Wehrmacht. The commanders in chief on all the fronts have accepted my authority. The German Wehrmacht now answers to my orders.

Soldiers! It is important to secure a just peace that allows the German people to live in peace and honor, and fosters voluntary and fruitful cooperation between the nations. I guarantee you that from now on the only sacrifices that will be required of you are those necessary to achieve this goal. All the concerted energies of the people will now be dedicated to this task. This is the end of the meaningless waste of energy and the half-hearted, belated decisions that have cost so much bloodshed.

Wherever you are, on the front or in the occupied territories, I pledge you to the laws of absolute obedience, soldierly discipline and honorable, gentlemanly behavior. Anybody who has failed to observe this or violates these laws in the future will be mercilessly called to account. At home in Germany we are also fighting for law and freedom, propriety and decency. I expect every one of you to continue doing your duty loyally and bravely. The fate of our fatherland, and our future and that of our children depends on this.

Soldiers! What is at stake is the existence and honor of our fatherland, and true community within our own nation and with the nations of the world.

Draft of the appeal by Erwin von Witzleben as commander in chief of the Wehrmacht, prepared for July 20, 1944. The original is missing; the present version was reconstructed from the documents of the Special Commission for Investigating the Assassination Attempt against Hitler of July 20, 1944. Translation: Karen Margolis. Editing: Ute Stepani, Prof. Dr. Johannes Tuchel.

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