

Mannerisms & Cultural Traits of

Germans in General

By Eric Tobey, edited by Jonathan Bocek

If you doubt the importance of "staying in character", think of this: have you ever gone to an event or a living-history facility which specialized in a period which you were not familiar with, and come away genuinely impressed? What was it that impressed you? Normally, it wouldn't have been a minute attention to "material authenticity" because the layman doesn't know what is right and what is not. What probably impressed you was the attempt by the living historians to stay "in character", and make you feel like you were really talking with a British Redcoat, a medieval knight, or whatever. It is this factor of "staying in character" which makes these historical figures really "live".

If you have ever been around Europeans for any length of time, then you will know that there are differences aside from the obvious difference in language. What follows are some guidelines for acting less "American", and more like a 1940's period German; the better we can "stay in character" by using the following traits will determine how convincing our impression will be. Doing this will not be easy because in some cases the correct "German" mannerism will seem awkward. We realize that the following traits are stereotypes, and possess all of the dangers inherent in such generalizations, however we have done this to help the reenactor. Mannerisms varied among the various German "tribes", & will be further detailed in a future article. The following traits are more or less valid for Germans in general. A writer named *Willi Hellpach* compiled what he termed the "six positive characteristics of the Germans". What he may not have realized was that the same six "positive" characteristics were probably also the source of many of the negative stereotypes:

Creative Energy: On a large scale, the Germans have always been great builders and inventors. On a smaller scale, individual Germans are some of the hardest-working people on the planet. In fact, the negative corollary of this trait was expressed by another writer named Hermann Eich: "The Germans have a mania for work. They have no idea how to enjoy life." GIs who occupied German positions were amazed to find bunkers with screen doors, carpets, paneling, and flowers on the table. In other German camps, the Landser had been raising gardens and had small rabbit farms. German prisoners made working model trains from wood. Germans have a reputation of being diligent and creative workers.

Germans were seldom idle, so try & stay busy: improving a camp site or positions, repairing uniforms and equipment, conducting document checks, writing letters, etc..**Thoroughness:** The Germans have a much-used saying: "Wenn schon, denn schon". In English, this means that if something is worth doing at all, it is worth doing right. It seems that the Germans never do something half-way. They are masters of organization and give great attention to detail. The negative implication here, of course, is that they are perfectionists and fussy. The perfect trait for the ideal bureaucrat, who appears again and again in German literature.

"Wenn schon, denn schon." It would be tough to improve on this. Try to develop the smaller details, like emulating the traits found here, issuing paperwork, procurement of personal effects, etc...**Orderliness:** Here's another famous German saying: "Ordnung muß sein!". There must be order! They are neat and everything must go by the rules. Punctuality is another by-product: the trains are always on time and woe to the person who is late in a meeting with a German! Of course, this mania for order also had some bad side-effects.

Follow the commander's schedule. Keep camps, billets, and persons neat and clean. Sloppy or ill-maintained uniforms and equipment should not be tolerated, nor should disruptive behavior. Also be **punctual.Sincerity:** Germans pride themselves in their honor; they generally do what they say. Even Adolf was quite frank when he told the world what he had planned when he wrote his book "Mein Kampf." On the other hand, there is another famous quote: "A German never tells a lie unless he believes it". It appears that sincerity can also be interpreted as "blue-eyed self-righteousness".

When you tell someone you will do something, either as individuals or as a unit, you should be true to your word. Be honest with one another. **Loyalty:** Here is a trait which the Germans have developed almost to the point of self-destruction. Utter loyalty to Adolf flattened Germany in the 1940s and led many of his followers into early graves. The SS even had as its motto: "Meine Ehre heißt Treue": my honor is my loyalty. Loyalty to his organization, family, country, and comrades is one of the things that made the German a natural soldier. In various times throughout history, however, the Germans have developed loyalty to its negative extreme: fanatical nationalism. Combine this with "firmness", and you got the stereotypical German would tell you that Germany and the Germans were superior, no matter what you said.

Practice Comradeship. Try to support your fellow members, your organization, and the hobby. Organizations should be structured to support their members as well. **Song:** Germans like group singing. To Americans, singing often seems overly sentimental or corny; singing of patriotic tunes is considered especially trite. To the 1940's German officers, the lack of singing was an indication of bad morale. It is surprising at how this aspect of German military life is neglected by reenactors, despite its authenticity and relative cost (nothing!). Learn your group's marching song and sing it. It may feel awkward, but it is important. The more members who sing, the better you sound.

Attitude towards the war: What kept the Landsers fighting even after the war was clearly lost? A combination of three things: his culture (which almost made a fetish of honor and loyalty, practically to the point of self-destruction), blind faith, and optimism. Perhaps we could add to this a dash of fear, also, from his own military justice system. Even though the common soldier no longer believed in total victory, especially after the Normandy invasion, he did hope for some type of favorable political settlement; therefore he saw himself as fighting for time. The war itself was accepted as a part of life itself, and as long as the various systems were operating, the people (and soldiers) developed an "alles klappt" (everything is ticking over) attitude, no matter what appeared to be looming on the horizon.

Love of nature: We read again and again about how the Germans are great fans of nature and animals. The examples are legion; Albert Krupp, the great industrialist, used to have a hose leading from his lofty office above his bustling factory down to a pile of manure. To relax and give himself pleasant thoughts, he would take a big whiff through the hose. Germans who could barely get enough for themselves to eat after the war were seen feeding portions of their rationed bread to the geese on the lakes near Berlin. There are many stories of Germans who carried a loyalty to their sick pets to almost ridiculous (by American standards, anyway) extremes. One of the authors of the manual this article came out of, played host to four young German men one summer, one of whom was a member of the Border Guard. He had great expectations of conversations about history and military topics, but to his disappointment, the Border Guard turned out to be most interested in rocks and soccer. Two of the others were tree buffs and the fourth only wanted to take pictures of deer and woodchucks.

Class consciousness: This is not such an admirable custom, but one which was very much in existence during WWII Germany. The Germans call this *Stände*, and it is almost as ingrained in German culture as it is in the British. The prosperous female who rated to be addressed "Dame" (Lady), would boil over at the ill-mannered brute who had the audacity to call her "Frau" (Ma'am). There was some deep-seated resentment at how the Wehrmacht accepted non-gentry officers into its ranks, despite all the "one class" posturing by the Nazis. Officers from the blue collar strata were sometimes given the derogatory name of VOMAG: Volksoffizier mit Arbeiter Gesicht (Volks-officer with the face of a laborer).

Politeness: Germans seem to have this in common with most other Europeans, at least when compared with Americans. The German language has some polite mechanisms built into it, for example the use of the formal "you" ("Sie") and the informal "you" which is used only with very close friends, children, family, and animals: "du". Germans also placed great importance on introductions and greetings; some American observers commented on the tiring custom of shaking everyone's hand both on entering and leaving a room.

Cigarettes: We have been told that another dead giveaway for the German was the way in which he held his cigarettes. Rather than hold them between his index and middle finger, the way an American does, the German was supposed to have held them between his thumb and index finger.

Posture: We once showed a picture of a bunch of German reenactors to a veteran and asked for his comments: "Look at that, he is standing like an American, slouched with hands in pockets!" Be careful of the typical casual American posture. The traditional German stance is much more upright

Chewing Gum: The Germans commented frequently on this - "those Americans are always chewing, chewing, chewing, just like cows." In fact, one slang term the Germans had for us was "Kaugummifresser". Do not chew gum!!!

Wedding Rings: One thing to keep in mind is that in Germany, wedding rings are worn on the right hand. If you are engaged, the ring is worn on your left hand.

Eating: Europeans often held their forks upside down in their left hand. A knife, spoon, or piece of bread is held in the right hand.