

READING

Pledging Allegiance

When German president Paul von Hindenburg died on August 2, 1934, Hitler combined the positions of chancellor and president. He was now the Führer and Reich chancellor, the head of state, and the chief of the armed forces. In the past, German soldiers had taken this oath:

I swear loyalty to the Constitution and vow that I will protect the German nation and its lawful establishments as a brave soldier at any time and will be obedient to the President and my superiors.

Now Hitler created a new oath.

I swear by God this sacred oath, that I will render unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler, the Führer of the German Reich and people, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and will be ready as a brave soldier to risk my life at any time for this oath.



Swearing Allegiance to Hitler

German military recruits swear allegiance to Adolf Hitler.

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In his book *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, William Shirer, an American journalist, writes that the new oath “enabled an even greater number of officers to excuse themselves from any personal responsibility for the unspeakable crimes which they carried out on the orders of the Supreme Commander whose true nature they had seen for themselves. . . . One of the appalling aberrations of the German officer corps from this point on rose out of this conflict of ‘honor’—a word . . . often on their lips. . . . Later and often, by honoring their oath they dishonored themselves as human beings and trod in the mud the moral code of their corps.”¹

¹ William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 227.

Connection Questions

1. Summarize the two oaths. What is the main difference between the two? How important is that difference? What are the implications of swearing an oath to an individual leader rather than to a nation?
2. How might taking an oath affect the choices a person makes? How does an oath affect the level of responsibility a person has for his or her actions? Is following an oath an acceptable explanation for making a choice that a person later regrets?
3. What oaths do people take today? For what reasons? How do such oaths affect people's choices? How should they?