

Gerhard Budde – context and character

(He was mentioned in letters from a friend, Leo Essink, to the youngest son of Gerhard, my grandfather Theo in 1915 and 1916)

Gerhard Budde was born in 1848, a year marked by widespread political unrest and early democratic movements across Europe. While it is unlikely that these events directly shaped his daily life in the relatively quiet region between Nordhorn and Ootmarsum, they form part of the broader historical backdrop of his lifetime.

As a young man, Gerhard lived through and participated in two defining conflicts in German history: the wars of 1866 and 1870–1871. These wars led to the unification of Germany and the emergence of the German Empire. Within the family, he became known as the “Der Altkrieger” (the veteran), a title that reflected both his military service and his identity as a representative of that formative generation. His own remark — “*Alles mitgemacht, siebzig en eiindziebsig*” — (1870/71) suggests a matter-of-fact reflection on having lived through these events.

A letter written in 1915 by Leo, a close friend of his son Theo, provides an additional and valuable glimpse into Gerhard’s later years. Leo notes that the “Altkrieger” would almost certainly have followed the developments of the First World War with great interest. In the same context, he remarks that Gerhard spent his time between the garden and the land, while also appreciating the comfort of the stove and the bed. This brief observation suggests a man still connected to daily rural life, yet increasingly attuned to the quieter rhythms of old age.

Yet the most vivid impression of Gerhard does not come from official history, but from a personal letter written in 1916 by Leo following his death. This brief but valuable account is the only known contemporary description of his character.

Leo recalls sitting with him for hours by the stove, listening to stories of the wars. Although these stories had been told many times, they continued to hold attention — not because of dramatic retelling, but because of the way Gerhard spoke: in a calm, measured and deliberate manner. This suggests a man whose authority came not from exaggeration, but from experience and quiet reflection.

Equally telling is Leo’s description of Gerhard’s “*smettelooze levenswandel*” — an exemplary or spotless life. This indicates that he was regarded not only as a veteran, but as a person of strong moral character, whose conduct itself formed a lasting example for the family. He appears as a respected and central figure, someone whose presence shaped those around him.

Gerhard’s life also spans a broader historical arc. Having taken part in the wars that contributed to the rise and unification of Germany, he lived long enough to witness — and ultimately die during — the period of the First World War, a conflict that profoundly reshaped Europe and was followed by a punitive settlement that plunged Germany into economic turmoil with far-reaching consequences.

Taken together, these elements portray Gerhard Budde as:

- a man formed by the great conflicts of the nineteenth century
- someone who remained engaged with the events of his own time
- a quiet and reflective storyteller rather than a boastful veteran
- a person of strong moral standing within his family
- a link between major historical events and everyday family life

Given the limited personal records from this period, the few lines written by Leo provide a remarkably rich insight. They transform Gerhard from a name in a genealogy into a person with presence, voice and character — and anchor the family history within the wider currents of European history.

Paul Budde