

The Nation

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Ludendorff's Apology

Ludendorff's Own Story. By Erich von Ludendorff.
Harper and Brothers.

WHEN the bitterness of these days has passed historians will very likely classify Ludendorff as first among the military geniuses of his time. But his "Own Story" will have importance principally because of certain sidelights it casts upon his motives and psychology. It is not written in popular style, although probably so intended, and it is not written in such a way as to satisfy the technical student of war. But we could hardly expect more than we have received from a man exhausted by the terrible strain of four years of the most stupendous work and responsibility, during a large part of which his acumen told him he was probably struggling in a lost cause, against forces which he could not overcome, finally to see his country encounter a dreadful fate for which he would in large part be blamed. Ludendorff's book is in fact an excuse and an apology, not indeed for Germany, but for Ludendorff himself. He makes it quite clear that he feels Germany more or less deserves her fate, so supine was she and so negligent of his advice.

Ludendorff's principal complaint against the political and constitutional leaders of Germany is directed toward the absence both at home and abroad of effective propaganda and counter-propaganda, designed, of course, to sustain morale in the homes and armies of Germany, to destroy enemy morale, and to maintain friendly feeling on the part of neutrals. Apparently the only effective propaganda undertaken by Germany was against the stability of the Russian government in 1917. He explains with admiration and always without reproach the splendid British organization for propaganda under Lord Beaverbrook, "with three directors, of whom Lord Northcliffe attended to the enemy countries, Kipling to home propaganda, and Lord Rothermere to the work in neutral countries. . . . The expressed aim of the American and British propaganda became ever more and more the achievement of an internal revolution in Germany."

It is not necessary for Ludendorff to point out to Americans the failure of German propaganda in neutral countries. Certainly German propaganda in America before we entered the war was not merely ineffective; it proved a veritable boomerang to the German cause. Experts will study why this was true and it is interesting to speculate whether they will conclude that lack of skill and energy in German as compared with Allied propaganda had anything to do with it, or whether the case for Germany was inherently so bad that her efforts must necessarily be unavailing.

Ludendorff assumes a general acceptance of the view that, from 1916 on, Hindenburg was the figurehead and himself the genius and the power. Those indeed were the facts, and that is the way with modern war. The Japanese were largely assisted to beat Russia in Manchuria in 1905 by the circumstance that Kuropatkin was obliged to combine the two rôles, while the Japanese pushed out in front Oyama, the exalted noble and elder of whom no one could display jealousy, the skilful Kodama behind the screen meantime furnishing the motive power. The wonder is that the Kaiser, like the Czar, did not constitute himself the military figurehead, or rather, perhaps, that having occupied that position at the beginning of hostilities, he ever became willing to surrender it. The fact that Hindenburg was pushed to the front is evidence that the Kaiser saw the handwriting of failure upon the wall, or perhaps indicates that the Kaiser's popularity was already recognized to be waning and that an idol had to be constituted of some other kind of clay.

With singular regularity the pendulum of success during the war swung from side to side. 1914, despite the over-running of Belgium, the occupation of Northern France by the Germans, and the defeat of the Russians at Tannenberg, was, on the whole, most favorable to the Allies, who overturned the Schlieffen plan of campaign when they saved Paris at the Marne and the Channel ports at the first battle of Flanders, and at the same time in the East overran Galicia and the Bukovina and stopped Hindenburg's attempts upon Warsaw.

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1915 was a German year, and principally through the activities of Hindenburg, Ludendorff and Mackensen in driving the Russians from Poland, Galicia, and Bukovina and well back of their second line of defense passing through Brest-Litovsk. 1915 also witnessed the Gallipoli disaster, certain "nibbling operations," so discouraging to the Allies upon the Western front, and the over-running of Serbia.

1916 declared itself for the Allies. Verdun was a great moral victory for France. The battle of the Somme warned the Germans of the extent of England's efforts and shook their confidence in final victory. The Brusilov drive revealed unsuspected powers of recuperation in Russia. Nothing but the taking of Bucharest occurred during this year to cheer the Central Powers, and after all most of the Rumanian army remained in being.

1917 again was German, even though it witnessed the entry of the United States into the war, for it witnessed also the Russian revolution and the gradual expiration of Russia as a belligerent power. In this process German propaganda was an important element. In the East this year was marked by a very successful German counter-offensive following the weak effort of Kerensky to demonstrate that the Russian army could make war without discipline, which is the cement of an army; and by successful German operations against Riga and vicinity. We have it from Ludendorff, however, that military operations against the Russians were held back during a part of this year lest they stir the Russians up into a fighting mood again. 1917, too, marked the great defeat of the Italians known as Caporetto, which threatened for a time to drive Italy out of the war.

The spring of 1918 witnessed the mighty German offensives which were planned to win the war. We can never forget them, and if they failed we know it is at once because Germany's allies were breaking down and because the German rear no longer efficiently supported the front, but most of all because of the unbelievable numbers of Americans delivered overseas during the very months of the German drives. Ludendorff knew there was no longer a chance of victory or of a draw when Foch let loose his forces south of Soissons on the morning of July 18, 1918. Thereafter the civil authorities moved toward a peace all too slowly for him. He would have us infer that a peace of the character that eventuated might have been refused and the Entente frightened into better terms. He will hardly believe this when he has had more time to recover his equanimity.

Ludendorff does not display in his book a fondness for discussing the strategy of pre-war statesmanship or he would have been unable to refrain from pointing out the effect on Germany's position in peace and war of her naval policy, as followed for a long period of years before the war began. Indeed he speaks but little of naval strategy. What does he think of the circumstance that the upbuilding of the German Navy in the first place made Great Britain Germany's certain enemy? And what does he think of Germany's neglect of the general rule that lesser navies are but concentrated national wealth and power in bundles convenient for destruction? Perhaps it is not because he has no ideas that he longs to express upon this subject, but because to lay upon German navalism what belongs there is in effect to blame the Kaiser, who was the German Navy's greatest champion, and Ludendorff is still too well disciplined to cast blame upon his war-lord. We should like to read what some German strategist of Ludendorff's rank might have frankly to say regarding Admiral Mahan and the sad influence of his theories upon German history.

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