

Free essay on general erich von Iudendorff

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General Erich von Ludendorff was a man of great influence in Germany during and after the First World War. He and Hindenburg had achieved the first great tangible victory of the war in the Battle of Tannenberg, then skyrocketed to such importance that, during the last years of the war, they were basically running the country together, with Wilhelm II becoming a mere figurehead. For this reason, it is important that his propagation of the “Dolchstoß Theorie”, or “stab in the back”, as the reason the war was lost is of vast importance for understanding this tumultuous period and the forces it pitted up against one another.

The “Dolchstoß Theorie” basically argues that Germany did not lose the war because of external forces, but rather because it was stabbed in the back by enemies from within. There were many reasons why this theory might appeal to many Germans, and soldiers in particular. For one thing, other than the Russian attempt to invade East Prussia all the way back in August of 1914, which Ludendorff and Hindenburg quickly crushed at Tannenberg, the enemy had not entered Germany at all. At the time the war ended, most of the German troops were still well into French territory. To the average citizen, it was hard to believe a war had been lost that they had never even seen take place. This also made the theory very appealing to former soldiers, many of whom were now out of work due to the drastic reduction of the army dictated by the Treaty of Versailles- they could take comfort in knowing that they (the military) had done everything right, and blame the loss entirely on others. This also probably encouraged a “martyrdom”-like concept of the self.

It was also convenient in that there were easy groups and people to place the blame on. The end of the war for Germany, though certainly inevitable by November of 1918, came about directly because of the German Revolution on November 9th. Riots had broken out in the naval docks in Kiel a few days before, and had spread throughout the country. There was street violence and production stoppages. One by one, local monarchy was forced to resign. Wilhelm II fled to exile in the Netherlands, where he would spend the rest of his life. Socialist republics were (however briefly) declared in numerous places, including Munich and Berlin. These were all events that the general public knew of, and many had experienced firsthand. The overthrow was not peaceful. It then did not help at all that the new government that resulted from it was in no position to be able to negotiate with the Entente whatsoever. They were forced into the unenviable position of asking for peace under any circumstances.

The Entente then exploited the fact that the new government was so weak and powerless by drafting the Treaty of Versailles, which had measures most would consider draconian in it, and forcing the new government to sign it. Measures it included would decimate the German people. Astronomical reparations were demanded; territory was amputated from the country, even in cases where the overwhelming majority of the population was German (such as Danzig and the Saarland), East Prussia, one of the wealthiest parts of the country up until that point, became an exclave, having a dramatic negative impact on the state's economy. And, in addition, the new government was forced to sign the "War Guilt" clause, which placed the entire responsibility for the war upon Germany (despite the fact that Austria-

Hungary had been the first to declare war). They were forced to sign all of these things or risk invasion and occupation of their now-fragile country, and they were not allowed to give input. But to the average German, it was still easy enough to blame them- they were the ones that had agreed to the “ Dictate of Versailles”, after all.

What Ludendorff was careful to avoid, and may indeed have been in utter denial about, was that it was in large part his own actions which led to Versailles. He and Hindenburg had largely been running the country on their own for the past two years. They were both military men, and prioritized military matters, leading to occasional civil unrest. Civilian matters were considered secondary, which probably did not endear many civilians to the government or the cause during the famous “ Turnip Winter” in 1917, when there was a drastic food shortage and many starved. The pair also made an absolutely fatal military decision. During the summer of 1918, they pushed off allied offers of peace and insisted the fight continue. Those offers likely would have been very generous, and it has been argued that logistically, at that point, the war was already lost, particularly with the Americans joining the Entente. But Hindenburg, and presumably Ludendorff by extension, recognized in September, after the Second Battle of the Marne, that the war was unwinnable. Rather than “ compromise” Germany’s position by trying to negotiate peace, though, the two insisted on continuing the fight to the bitter end, quite possibly out of denial (Ludendorff’s later subscription to the “ Dolchstoss Theorie” would certainly indicate a great deal of denial, since he himself had been in a position to do something about it and instead did nothing, leading directly to Versailles). Had they sought peace while still

appearing to be capable of continuing the war, the terms would certainly have been more favorable than the ones they ended up with.

The Dolchstoß Theory was something that offered Ludendorff, and others, the opportunity to blame someone other than themselves. Ludendorff certainly clung to it, authoring many slanted propaganda materials propagating the image and holding many public events, such as speeches, promoting it. He later briefly allied with Hitler, lending his very famous name and credibility to a man who, at that time, was still largely unknown, and participating (really, actively leading) the Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler's failed attempt to take over the government in 1923 that first brought him large-scale notoriety and led to his authoring *Mein Kampf* while serving his sentence in Landsberg Prison. Indeed, Ludendorff's "Dolchstoß Theorie" propaganda would lay the groundwork for many of the talking points that the Nazis would later exploit to gain public opinion. The importance of its impact in undermining the government of the Weimar Republic and ultimately leading to the Enabling Act which granted Hitler emergency powers in 1933 cannot be underestimated, nor can Ludendorff's responsibility for laying the framework of right-wing propaganda and talking points which Hitler would later exploit in his power grab. It is truly unfortunate, and ironic, that Ludendorff, one of the men arguably responsible for the reason the terms at Versailles ended up being so harsh, not only refused to take any of the responsibility himself, but actually came up with a theory that blamed the very people that theory would ultimately take down.

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