



TOO WEIRD FOR THE NAZIS: ERICH LUDENDORFF

By Jay Lockenour and Ron Granieri, September 28, 2021
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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace: The War Room Podcast. I'm Ron Granieri, Professor of History in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and podcast editor of The War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Here at A Better Peace, in addition to discussions of current events and security policy, we aim to introduce our audience to some of the most interesting new works of military history and social science.

Today, we are pleased to welcome Professor Jay Lockenour to discuss his new book, [*Dragonslayer: The Legend of Erich Ludendorff in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich*](#), from Cornell University Press. Erich Ludendorff is one of the most fascinating figures in German military history. A relentlessly driven officer who rose to General within the Imperial German Army, despite lacking an aristocratic background, Ludendorff helped plan and execute the signal early German victories of the First World War at Liege and Tannenberg in 1914. Then as the power behind Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg, Ludendorff shaped German strategy and political life in the latter half of the war. After Germany's defeat in 1918, Ludendorff then became deeply involved in German nationalist movements, culminating in the Nazi Beer Hall Putsch in 1923 in Munich, where he collaborated with Hitler, marching with him through the city.

Ludendorff never gained political power in the Weimar Republic or in the Third Reich, and would have a falling out with Hitler, though his story shows the complex relationship between the military and politics in 20th century Germany, a story that Professor Lockenour tells with reference to Ludendorff's own voluminous writings in addition to the most up-to-date scholarship. Jay Lockenour is an historian at Temple University specializing in the social and military history of Germany in Europe. In addition to *Dragonslayer*, he is also the author of [*Soldiers as Citizens*](#) and the former host of the [New Books in Military History Podcast](#). He's currently studying the transnational history of the military and sports.

Welcome to A Better Peace, Dr. Jay Lockenour.

Jay Lockenour: Thanks Ron. Thanks for that lovely introduction.

RG: Happy to do it. So, Jay, what led you to this topic and to Ludendorff in particular?

JL: Well, like a lot of good topics, it just sort of fell into my lap. I had done some work as an undergrad on the Third Supreme Command, Ludendorff's collaboration with Hindenburg at the end of the First World War, and somebody who was working on an encyclopedia of anti-Semitism got wind of that earlier work and asked me if I would write a short encyclopedia entry on Eric Ludendorff, his second wife, Mathilde, and their publishing company. And that just took me by surprise because while I knew a lot about Ludendorff, I thought, I knew nothing about his second wife, nor the existence of their publishing company. So it just in exploring those for those short pieces turned me on to this fascinating subject, an almost completely unknown post-war history of Erich Ludendorff.

RG: Right. And what makes your book, readers will know this once they get a chance to read it, which they should, but what makes your book different from a conventional biography?

JL: Yeah, so that was one of the mistakes I made was I thought I was just going to be able to write a biography of Erich Ludendorff, and for a variety of reasons that proved to be impossible and probably not necessary in the sense that we already know a great deal about his life during the war especially. The last English biography, serious English biography, was done in the 1960s, a German biography appeared, I want to say 2012, by Manfred Nebelin, which is very good, authoritative, I would say, but like all the other work on Ludendorff stops in 1918 and just references a flirtation with Hitler and ends it there. And so this is a book that carries that story forward, revealing a great deal about Ludendorff, about German political culture, about the Third Reich.

RG: Right. Well, and that's what I wanted to ask you, based on other scholarship, but also the way the work is, is that Ludendorff famously in the late summer and early fall of 1918, when he realizes the war is lost and he tells the Kaiser, "We're going to have to ask for an armistice," that the story is he had some kind of a nervous collapse. If Ludendorff had dropped dead in September of 1918, what would the historical judgment about Erich Ludendorff be?

JL: Well, so ironically, I don't think it would be very different.

RG: Oh.

JL: Because in the sense of a scholarship, he does drop dead or goes crazy, disappears off a cliff in 1918. So in some ways I would say the historical legacy wouldn't change as we know it now. I

wouldn't have needed to write this book, for one thing. It might be the only difference, but it's in fact the telling of that story that I find so fascinating.

RG: Yeah. Well, that's where I wanted to go. So you're the first scholar to really go in depth into what happens after the war's over and what he does instead of treating it as sort of this embarrassing last chapter in an old man's life, that you actually find a way to link his past to his present. And so, well, first of all, I guess, I think you've already hinted at this, the reason why people don't talk about his post-war career in any great detail. But what links do exist, based on your study, between his career before 1918 and his life after 1918?

JL: What I discovered, especially when I read his writings was that he spent the rest of his life telling the story of the First World War and his role in it according to a very specific set of terms, to help create, I argue, this legend around himself, that he was this decisive, brave, heroic, warrior who stormed the fortress at Liege single-handedly, and then the operational genius who wins terrific German victories on the Eastern front, especially at Tannenberg, and Poland, Galicia, other places on the Eastern front, and then who masterminded as the Feldherr, as the mastermind of German strategy after 1916. Of course he has the problem that he has to explain why Germany lost, if he's such a genius, how did Germany manage to lose? And that's where the second wife really comes in is with this idea of supranational powers, Jews, Freemasons, and for Ludendorff especially, Catholics, who were behind the scenes, controlling the world one way or another, sometimes fighting against each other, but always to the detriment of Germany, which of course in a very kind of Nazi sounding rhetoric, is racially superior and if all things were equal, if the world weren't run by this conspiracy, that Germans would in fact be on top.

RG: Right. I'm fascinated in the book that you emphasize how Ludendorff tells a story similar to that of the great hero, that he is completely invulnerable, except he's vulnerable in the back because Siegfried would never turn his back on an enemy and so ultimately he's defeated when he is stabbed in the back.

JL: Right. Well, Siegfried, we can talk more about Siegfried if you want. That's obviously kind of a whole separate story, but Siegfried's vulnerability comes from a linden leaf that fell on his back while he was bathing in a dragon's blood. So like Achilles being dipped in the river, he had that one vulnerable spot.

RG: Right.

JL: But you're right, as a mighty warrior, how would he ever get caught in the back?

RG: Well, and this, I think, it gets into the complex thing to try to understand. What was the, the political and intellectual world that Ludendorff ends up getting involved in after 1918? This

nationalism, where the Nazis are one of many such political parties. Is Ludendorff an OG nationalist and where does his development there fit in with the rise of the Nazi party in particular?

JL: Yeah, so Ludendorff, the right wing in Germany after 1918 is a very scary place, and Ludendorff gradually, I think, over the course of several years moves further and further into that radical wing of German conservatism. He doesn't seem to have any patience for monarchism, for restoration of the monarchy. He doesn't think very much of mainstream conservative politicians, some of whom he associated with the lost war. And so he becomes radicalized by this idea and the appeal of the Nazis and other groups like him, he swims in this world. And what I argue is that he's, I want to really, I try to emphasize this because of the frequent and understandable focus on Hitler, is that until 1923, Ludendorff is the most important figure on the radical right wing of German politics, not Hitler. And Hitler's rising, Hitler tries to associate himself with Ludendorff at various moments, that kind of an increasingly close relationship that culminates in 1923 in that Beer Hall Putsch that you mentioned.

But it's Ludendorff that's this that's the star, it's Ludendorff is the reason that the trial gets covered in the papers, not so much Hitler, although people had heard of him. And obviously the trial is the point at which Hitler really makes his name and eclipses Ludendorff pretty dramatically because of his testimony. Ludendorff's testimony was kind of sad. He tried to disavow any involvement, really, in the planning of the putsch, and he just happened to be going by, basically, was his excuse, and anyway, I love my country. And that was the finding of the judge actually, is that even though Ludendorff was on trial for treason, just like Hitler was, he was exonerated based on his peerless nationalist credentials. Whatever Ludendorff had in mind, it had to be for the good of Germany basically is what the judge said.

RG: Wow.

JL: So he goes free.

RG: And yet what his role have been if the Beer Hall Putsch had succeeded in 1923, if the Nazis had taken over the government in Munich, and, heck, they'd hoped to March on Berlin. Was the idea that Ludendorff would have been the leader of Germany?

JL: Well, so they never come down as clearly as that. There's some thought that they would be a team, kind of a tag team, that Hitler had the political sensibilities and that Ludendorff had both the respect of many conservatives, many other nationalists and the military experience, that they would form a two-person triumvirate.

RG: Nice.

JL: A duo.

RG: A duo.

JL: A dynamic duo.

RG: A dynamic duo. Well, and yet, so Hitler, at the trial, after their failure of the putsch, famously write that Ludendorff of all of the marchers, when the police opened fire, he apparently just keeps on marching and walks all the way through the police line, then turns around and realize nobody is following him anymore.

JL: Well, and a captain of the police kind of gently taps him on the shoulder and says, "Excuse me, sir, Your Excellence, would you mind very much coming with me?" And so he takes him to the station. That's the story, anyway.

RG: Right.

JL: There's some people that would dispute the veracity of that, but there are enough people who swear that they saw it happen.

RG: Right.

JL: That I put it in the book.

RG: Well, and so then Ludendorff is exonerated. Hitler gets an absurdly light sentence of five years, but only serves nine months, but he does spend some time in jail. You describe how Ludendorff tries but fails to essentially take over the Nazi movement. What happens to Ludendorff's plans to make something of himself as the leader of this movement?

JL: Well, I think, just personally, he's too dogmatic. He just doesn't have political sensibilities, I think I used that term before. But he's brusque. He demands absolute loyalty, and if people don't give it to him, then he shuts them out. And so he wasn't able to form a working alliance, really with anybody else in the Nazi party. There were a couple of people that formed the leadership during that time along with him, but he never developed any really close bonds to those others. And he was having to deal with Hitler's already large and growing popularity within the movement, that Hitler really was becoming during that same period, the center of the Nazi party.

RG: And then Ludendorff then shifts, or perhaps, I don't know if it's a shift, but he becomes increasingly involved in a larger, or let's say intellectual project with his second wife Mathilde. And I would say that the one thing that people who haven't read this book, or when they read it

they will discover, is that there were people in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s that the Nazis thought were a little too out there, intellectually. And one of those people was Mathilde Ludendorff and her husband. And what was their deal?

JL: Well, Mathilde ran in the same circles as the Nazis increasingly during 1922, '23. She would speak at gatherings where Nazis were also speaking about this philosophy that she had called Deutsche Gotterkenntnis which is the Germanic understanding of God. And when I started with this project, my sincere intention was to try to explain this philosophy of hers. And I just can't. It's kind of a Neo-Pagan, blood spirit religion. The name comes from the fact that according to her, and one of the ways they would try to get out of charges of racism or anti-Semitism was they would say every race possesses and by this she means Germans and English, Anglo-Saxons, and they would use those kind of social Darwinists terms.

RG: Right.

JL: Every race has an inherent spirituality. And that fulfillment, she used terms like this too, freedom, would come only in accessing that natural spirituality that is inherent in each race. And so they would, again, to avoid charges of racism, they would say, "Well, everyone has that." But by following Christianity, Germans have become alienated from that inherent spirituality. Christianity to Mathilde and to Erich was a Jewish fabrication. They had sampled some Hindu mystic documents and mixed them in with some old commandment stuff and some Old Testament stuff and cooked up this religion to trick Europeans and especially Germans into believing in what is essence, Judaism. That's her suggestion.

RG: Right. And so they, of course, weren't the only German nationalists who embraced various forms of Neo-Paganism. And yet the Nazis were reluctant, even though the Nazis themselves flirted with Neo-Paganism and certainly had their problems with the churches, but the Nazis were never completely comfortable with embracing this approach. Why?

JL: Well, I think it's pragmatism, at the very least, I mean, who knows what Hitler actually believed...

RG: Right.

JL: ...deep down inside, but he was politically smart enough not to alienate the 89.99% of Germans who were churchgoing Christians of one branch or another. So at the very least people like Himmler who were more closely identified with the pagan side were kept on somewhat of a leash, at least in public, and at least for the earlier years. And Ludendorff would have been just for them an embarrassment for that reason. They really disliked Mathilde. Goebbels writes about her in his diaries, just can't stand her. And a lot of people who want to still respect Erich

Ludendorff see Mathilde as having corrupted him and she's to blame for all of his wackiness. And so it's the strong influence of a woman.

RG: Right.

JL: So they develop a team, they work together as a team, really, where she fancies herself a philosopher and takes on the more spiritual side, is really kind of the head of this Deutsche Gotterkenntnis, the league for the Germanic understanding of God, where Erich is the head of the Tannenberg League and the two exist, it's almost hard to tell them apart at times, but Erich identifies more closely with the Tannenberg League named for that famous battle in 1914, for which he was responsible.

RG: And Erich maintains his connection, or tries to maintain his connection, to military circles. He's an advocate for preparedness and the Wehrmacht tries to cultivate him as well, is this true, in the years after the war?

JL: Correct. He's enormously well-respected, again, especially in military circles, for his ideas and so he would write frequently in his newspaper that he founded in the mid-1920s about military affairs and strategy. And my sense is that these things were read, certainly his publications were widely read and reviewed in military journals, things *Der Totale Krieg*, *The Total War* book that came out in 1935. So people, even if they couldn't stand to be around him, listened to what he had to say.

Now, what's what was remarkable to me was that so few of these people commented on the other wacky stuff that was always sprinkled in with his military writing, about how Moltke the Younger was a Freemason, for example. That was one of his theories. So this conspiracy that they imagine is, I discovered at some point that it was kind of perfect, because anti-Semitism was obviously relatively widespread in Germany and getting worse so that wasn't so unusual. And most German Jews identified proudly as such, and so they were not hard to find. Same thing for Catholics, even though there had been persecution over the years, especially in Bavaria, Catholics were very proudly acknowledge the fact. So if one of your enemies was identifiably Jewish or Catholic, you could tarnish them that way. If you couldn't obviously connect them with either of those backgrounds, then they were Freemasons, and Freemasons, if you don't like somebody, then they're a Freemason, and Freemason is a secret society, Masonry is secret so they won't tell you, so it's kind of the perfect dodge for labeling anybody you want an enemy.

RG: And so for Ludendorff then, he's constantly in this weird position of he does have, let's say, respectable supporters, but he's serious about the conspiracy stuff, but his advocates or his supporters think they can be sort of “cafeteria Ludendorffians” and they can take the military stuff and leave the other stuff aside.

JL: Right. And the effort really picks up steam after the death of Paul von Hindenburg when the military really starts to take an interest in Ludendorff as kind of symbolic of the old army, as a shield, almost, between the Nazis and the army to prevent Nazi encroachment. The feeling is that he could fill that role that Hindenburg had filled during his life of sort of maintaining the independence of the army in the face of national socialism.

RG: And yet Ludendorff only lives for a few, so Hindenburg dies in '34, Ludendorff dies in '37.

JL: Yeah, in December.

RG: And how does the German regime, both of the Wehrmacht, but also the larger Nazi regime, how do they memorialize or use the memory of Ludendorff?

JL: So those efforts to kind of bring Ludendorff back into the military fold are marginally successful, I would say. When Hitler introduces conscription, when he introduces the Luftwaffe in 1935, Ludendorff makes some public statements in favor of the move saying, "Yes, Germany's finally regaining some of its strength." In exchange for which, some of the restrictions on his organization were lifted by the Nazis. So they were supposed to be allowed to circulate their literature on military bases, for example, after this accord was reached. But the relationship continued to be very fraught because Ludendorff was very touchy and the slightest little perceived insult drew his ire and so he would charge back into the fray.

He had an associate named Robert Holtzmann who was kind of his representative in Berlin who had frequent meetings with the military leadership, and with Himmler as well, who remained a kind of fan of Ludendorff's and did what he could to try to intercede on his behalf. So he had some high-powered friends.

RG: And in general, the story of how you ended up writing this book in this way, you're dealing with an aspect of Ludendorff's career that is less understood. As a scholar of military history, but also this concept of the military and society, how do you think your approach in this book can enlighten sort of future work on the role of say military celebrities in the political lives of their countries?

JL: Well, for one thing, and one of the manuscript reviewers actually kind of brought this to my attention, the extent to which I'm studying him as an author, because partly because there are no typical archival papers associated with Ludendorff, very, very few. There are a scattering, a smattering, of them here and there. So I ended up reading his enormous published works and Mathilde's as well. So I'm studying him partly as an author, and that was helpful to conceive of it that way. And the other part, what else can we learn? It's really about memory and legend

making in a political culture. I tell the story of these battles and I kind of summarize his military career, but really focus on the elements that he latched onto and his followers and supporters and critics alike, the things that they latched on to from that story of the war. So it's almost kind of on a meta level, only on a meta level military history, because it's relying on the memory and the story making, storytelling, about that war.

RG: I'm trying to think when I was reading the book and now as we're sitting here talking, I'm trying to think, leaving aside the content of Ludendorff's politics, as difficult as that is, can we think of another figure, that high ranking, that famous a military figure, who turned into a public intellectual or political advocate in his post-military career, either in Germany or any place else?

JL: Hmm.

RG: I mean, I can think of generals who ended up getting elected President.

JL: Right.

RG: But I can't think of somebody who would try to do what Ludendorff tried to do.

JL: Yeah. This isn't an answer to your question, necessarily.

RG: That's all right, go ahead.

JL: But it's something I've said in this context before, which is one of the difficulties of writing a biography of Ludendorff is it would be like trying to write a biography of Eisenhower if Eisenhower had invented Scientology.

RG: Right. Yes.

JL: Because he's got this incredibly important military career, there's so much work on that.

RG: Right.

JL: Here's is this less well-known but incredibly important political figure for 20 years after the war is over. And then he invents, or his wife invents a religion.

RG: Yeah.

JL: So it was a complex story.

RG: Complex story, indeed. And a story that I think that people who are interested in the history of the German army, Germany and the 20th century, and even the origins of national socialism will find very interesting and very complicated. It's definitely worth your time. I encourage my listeners out there to take a look at a copy of [*Dragonslayer: The Legend of Erich Ludendorff in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich*](#), and Jay Lockenour, thanks so much for joining us here on A Better Peace to talk about it.

JL: Thank you.

RG: And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us suggestions for future programs. We are always interested in hearing from you, and you should subscribe to A Better Peace if you have not already. And after you subscribe to A Better Peace, please rate and review this podcast on your pod catcher of choice, which helps others to find us as well. We're always interested in broadening this community and hearing from you, and we look forward to welcoming you all again, but until next time, from The War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.