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“HEIL LUDENDORFF”

ERICH LUDENDORFF AND NAZISM, 1925-1937

by

STEVEN NAFTZGER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2002

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract**“HEIL LUDENDORFF”****ERICH LUDENDORFF AND NAZISM, 1925-1937****by****Steven Naftzger****Advisor: Professor Walter Struve**

Ludendorff's historical role as a radical German nationalist after World War I is more significant than previously assumed. After World War I, German “radical nationalism” advocated national resurrection, called for a return to traditional pre-modern culture and values, exalted war, distrusted internationalism, and was racist. Until his death in 1937, Ludendorff and his movement served as a radical nationalist alternative to Hitler and the NSDAP. Considerable interaction existed between his movement, the Tannenbergbund, and Nazism.

Once securely in power the NSDAP, with some restrictions, permitted him to disseminate his propaganda for popular consumption, but because of his popularity among radical German nationalists, structural weaknesses in the Nazi state, and inconsistent implementation of policy, the Nazi regime had difficulty controlling his activities and those of his supporters. Ultimately, the regime recognized the Ludendorff movement. This dissertation argues that the NSDAP, despite several campaigns to control him and the Tannenbergbund, sought to accommodate Ludendorff, who served as a symbol of unity for the many factions within radical German nationalism.

Ludendorff formed the Tannenbergbund in 1925 to advance his and his wife Mathilde's ideology of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* (German Perception of God) and to influence fascist and radical conservative political movements in Germany. He later founded a publishing house and sponsored lecture tours to better publicize his radical nationalism. The NSDAP, after initially outlawing the Tannenbergbund, eventually completed the absorption of the Ludendorff movement, as it had earlier absorbed similar organizations such as the Stahlhelm and other World War I veterans' organizations.

Only three scholars have investigated in detail Ludendorff's post-war career: Bruno Thoss, Gert Borst, and Richard Mayo D. Piazza. My work, which draws upon previously unavailable archival materials from the Tannenbergbund leadership and Ludendorff activists Herbert Frank, August Lindner, and Robert Holtzmann, goes beyond these works to investigate how Ludendorff's movement aided the Nazi regime in unifying radical German nationalists and thereby gaining political strength.

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Introduction

A life dedicated to the Fatherland is not extreme, but a matter of course.¹

-- Erich Ludendorff, 1923

The doctrine of Ludendorff is simple: the whole energy of the German people must be concentrated on the war. All other enterprises and ambitions must be put out of mind. All business that is not necessary to the one end must be abandoned.²

-- H. L. Mencken, on assignment in Germany during World War I

In January 1999, when I visited Germany on my first research trip, I told a German friend that I was writing a dissertation on Erich Ludendorff. She said that she had never heard of him, and when she asked both her fiancé and her brother if they knew of Ludendorff, they too said that they had no idea who he was. Her father, on the other hand, knew quite a bit about him, which prompted her to exclaim: "Only fathers know about such things." A short time later, I visited Tutzing, Bavaria, where Ludendorff spent the last years of his life. I knew that he was buried in this town, but there were no markers pointing to his gravesite. While searching the last of three cemeteries, I finally located a monument approximately two and one-half meters tall, capped with a bronze bust, and placed in a secluded corner of the cemetery. Someone not looking for it would

¹ Erich Ludendorff, *Feldherrnworte*, vol. 1 (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1938), 8.

² H. L. Mencken, "Ludendorff," *The Atlantic Monthly* 119 (June 1917): 827.

easily miss the site; vines and moss covered it. Although German cemeteries, unlike American ones, offer no perpetual care, the monument's neglect was astonishing. Here stood the memory of Ludendorff in Germany at the end of twentieth century. Except for his gravesite and a private memorial in his former house, nothing in Tutzing indicated that he had ever lived there. It is odd that in less than two generations this man, who controlled the destiny of his country during World War I, who raised passionate debates among Germans of all political stripes, and who was intimately connected with the National Socialist movement, has become obscure.

Indeed, why should anyone remember Ludendorff? In a sense, he personified early twentieth-century Germany. His confidence and talent, as well as his arrogance and shortsightedness, characterized the final years of Kaiser Wilhelm II's Empire. His bitterness in defeat paralleled Germany's bitterness with the Treaty of Versailles. His frustration with parliamentary politics more than equaled the frustration of the Weimar Republic's most contentious critics. His racism and other prejudices typified all that was worst in Germany between the two world wars. Perhaps it is understandable that the youngest generation of Germans, far removed from the catastrophic events of the early twentieth century, consider the world of their grandparents and great-grandparents irrelevant, since Germany in 1999 is not Germany in 1945, 1933, or 1919. Yet to forget Ludendorff is to forget a critical period in modern German history.

This dissertation investigates Ludendorff and the radical German nationalist movement by examining his ideology, his activities, and his supporters. In order to understand Ludendorff's impact on fascist and radical conservative political parties in general and the National Socialist German Workers Party (*Nationalsozialistische*

Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, or NSDAP) in particular, this dissertation discusses the special relationship Ludendorff and his movement, the Tannenbergbund, had with the NSDAP and the numerous veterans' organizations. Ludendorff and his supporters made important contributions to radical German nationalism and consequently to the development of Nazism. This dissertation also discusses the influence Ludendorff's movement had on the development of the Nazi regime. Because it shared members with other radical nationalist organizations, the Tannenbergbund influenced the character of the NSDAP after 1925. Most of his supporters eventually joined the Nazis but maintained their respect for him and his ideology. Since it is important to understand his ideology in order to place it on the confusing and diverse spectrum of radical conservative and fascist movements in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s, this dissertation discusses the social content of the Tannenbergbund and the ideology that attracted Germans to Ludendorff's cause. Once the Nazis gained political power, they made Ludendorff's militarist and racist ideology acceptable. This development had important consequences for German society. The NSDAP served as a vehicle for the dissemination of Ludendorff's neopagan spirituality. As a result, the Ludendorff movement affected the Catholic Church during the Third Reich.

Ludendorff and radical German nationalism

Radical nationalism, a romantic, chauvinist, and racist ideology which sought to unify society and reverse perceived wrongs by overturning the existing political structure, was a component of both fascism and radical conservatism. The soul of the nation, radical German nationalists believed, lived within the *Volk* and bound it to the "socialism

of the blood.” The romantic nature of radical nationalism emerged in the idea that the values, morals, and beliefs of the nation could be found in the distant, pre-modern past. Radical nationalists feared and distrusted international organizations and movements because such organizations and movements unduly influenced the national community and imposed external constraints on national freedom. International organizations and movements represented the antithesis of the racially and culturally pure nation. Fascism and radical conservatism, however, utilized different aspects of radical nationalist ideology. Radical nationalism’s emphasis on national regeneration attracted fascists, while its call for order and stability appealed to radical conservatives.

Radical nationalism was both a political movement and a social movement. In the first decades of the twentieth century its German proponents, such as the Fatherland Party or bourgeois militarist organizations such as the Naval League, had become political forces which made national allegiance supreme, demanded national unity, and required absolute loyalty to the national community. Coming from outside the ruling class, it challenged the traditional conservative and aristocratic German elite, for radical nationalism advocated the reform of social status. Since radical nationalists believed that an individual’s service to the nation determined his place in the nation’s hierarchy of status, radical nationalism was meritocratic and appealed to both the political Left and the Right.³ Ludendorff traveled with this political current, for although he was a military

³ See, for example, the definitions of radical nationalism posed by Geoff Eley in “What Produces Fascism: Preindustrial Traditions or the Crisis of the Capitalist State?” *Politics and Society* 12, no. 1 (1983): 53-82; and George L. Mosse in *Masses and Man. Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1980), 11-13. Roger Eatwell and Roger Woods also discuss the impact of radical nationalism on Germany during the interwar years. See Roger Eatwell’s introduction to Roger Eatwell

officer, he was not a member of the traditional German elite. Some of his peers in the officer corps often reminded him that he did not spring from the *Junker* class of aristocratic East Elbian property owners. Like many other radical nationalists, he remained outside the political and social elite of society. On the other hand, his conservative emphasis on order and stability, as well as his status as a war hero, led many young officers of aristocratic and bourgeois backgrounds to sympathize with his movement. Ludendorff's brand of radical nationalism transcended the differences between fascism and radical conservatism in Germany, making it attractive to both.

Ludendorff's movement borrowed ideas, as did the fascists, from both the political Right and Left, merging them into an ideology designed to restore, strengthen, expand, and defend the unified national community. According to Ludendorff and other radical nationalists, class conflict was counter-productive. This idea was common on the political Right. On the other hand, borrowing from ideas common on the political Left, they sought to protect the economic gains and political strength of the working class and wanted to diminish the economic and political power of the traditional conservative elite. They also argued that a masculine leader who combined the roles of high priest and warrior-chieftain and who embodied the soul of the *Volk* ought to rule at the pinnacle of power.

Radical nationalism was a necessary component of fascism. Ludendorff's ideology might have found a home in fascism, but he remained personally uncomfortable

and Noël O'Sullivan, eds., *The Nature of the Right: European and American Politics and Political Thought since 1789* (London: Pinter Press, 1989), 30; and Roger Woods, "The Radical Right: The 'Conservative Revolutionaries' in Germany" in *The Nature of the Right*, 125-30.

with the dynamic, heterogeneous, and violent nature of fascism. Fascism during the interwar years was a palingenetic, socialist, violent, eclectic, youth-oriented ideology with mass appeal. It was idealist, authoritarian, and statist; multi-class, militarist, and expansionist; anti-liberal, anti-conservative, and anti-Communist. Fascists attempted to mobilize the masses by emphasizing aesthetics, political liturgy, mysticism, masculinity, youth, and charismatic leadership. Ludendorff distrusted the masses and refused to cultivate their support. Indeed, he was suspicious of mass politics because he believed mass society to be fickle and easily distracted by demagogues. Nevertheless, some of Ludendorff's tenets could find a home in fascism. In its eclecticism, fascism combined racism, nationalism, socialism, and, in some instances, anti-Semitism, into an ideology that cut across social classes, thereby reaching a broad audience. Fascism borrowed important components from radical nationalism since it strove to restore national self-esteem by returning to the mythic core and traditional values of the nation. Supporting radical nationalism, fascism tended to be hostile to international organizations and movements, such as Catholicism, international capitalism, and Communism.⁴

⁴ See recent definitions of fascism posed by Stanley G. Payne in *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). Other helpful definitions of fascism can be found in Roger Griffin, ed., *Fascism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Roger Eatwell, "Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 4, no. 2 (1992); George Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: H. Fertig, 1999); and Juan J. Linz, "Some Notes toward a Comparative Study of Fascism in Sociological Historical Perspective," in *Fascism: A Reader's Guide*, ed. Walter Laqueur (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979). Although there are numerous studies dedicated to investigating fascism, for the purposes of this dissertation, I have relied on these works since they are the most recent comprehensive accounts of this political and social movement.

Ludendorff's radical nationalism also corresponded to the ideology advanced by the participants in the Conservative Revolution, such as Ernst Jünger, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, and Carl Schmitt. During the interwar years radical conservatives, as well as fascists, held contemporary society in contempt but hoped to integrate the fractured polity and culture of their countries. The nation, or, among German racists, the *Volk*, served as the binding force that integrated society and made it whole and indivisible. Unlike fascists, however, radical conservatives relied on religion to define and unify the nation, advocating a return to old forms of authority such as the monarchy in order to lead their people. Less willing to embrace the mass polity and overthrow the existing order, radical conservatives, unlike fascists, tried to use the military to advance their political agenda.⁵ Ludendorff fit squarely in this tradition, for in the Third Reich he convinced the Wehrmacht to accept his wife's anti-Christian, radical nationalist and racist philosophy of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*. If fascists emphasized radical nationalism's appeal to the mass national community, then Ludendorff after 1925 was at ease with radical conservatives for they emphasized radical nationalism's appeal to stability, order, and continuity. Nonetheless, the NSDAP found him to be a valuable ally in its struggle to transform Germany.

⁵ For comprehensive definitions of radical conservatism and the Conservative Revolution, see Jerry Z. Muller, *The Other God that Failed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Armin Mohler, *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland, 1918-1932* (Stuttgart: Friedrich Vorwerk Verlag, 1950); Klemens von Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism: Its History and Dilemma in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); Roger Woods, *The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Stefan Breuer, *Anatomie der Konservativen Revolution* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993); and Payne, *History of Fascism*.

Method, sources, and materials

Many scholars have investigated Ludendorff's military role in World War I. Few, however, have explored his life after the Hitler Putsch of 1923, and none has studied his career during the Third Reich. Because Ludendorff was politically significant but controversial, Germans have found it difficult to write objectively about him. Strident nationalists used his memoirs and other publications to rally opposition to the Treaty of Versailles and bolster the strength of radical German nationalism. Under the Nazi regime, Ludendorff was widely praised as a national hero. Objective studies of Ludendorff reappeared in the two decades following World War II, but these popular biographies generally emphasize his role in World War I.⁶ No comprehensive and balanced scholarly biography of the man exists. Most biographers, perhaps with their audience in mind, understandably found Ludendorff's military persona more worthy of

⁶ See, for example, Wilhelm Breucker, *Die Tragik Ludendorffs: Eine kritische Studie auf Grund persönlicher Erinnerungen an den General und seine Zeit* (Stollham: Helmut Rauschenbusch Verlag, 1953); Karl Tschuppik, *Ludendorff: The Tragedy of a Military Mind*, trans. W. H. Johnston (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932); D. J. Goodspeed, *Ludendorff: Soldier. Dictator. Revolutionary* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1966) and the American edition of his work *Ludendorff: Genius of World War I* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966); and Roger Parkinson, *Tormented Warrior: Ludendorff and the Supreme Command* (New York: Stein and Day, 1978). Breucker's biography is noteworthy because it is the first reasonably objective post-World War II study of Ludendorff, but scholars should view it with some skepticism. Breucker served as Ludendorff's adjutant during World War I and worked for some time as an intermediary between Ludendorff and Hitler. The most recent biography of Ludendorff, Franz Uhle-Wettler's *Erich Ludendorff in seiner Zeit: Soldat - Stratege - Revolutionär. Eine Neubewertung* (Berg: Verlagsgesellschaft Berg, 1996), places greater emphasis than other biographies on Ludendorff's activities after World War I, but the book lacks substantial archival support. Wolfgang Venohr's *Ludendorff: Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1993) focuses on Ludendorff's military career. There also exist a number of hagiographies published by the successor publishing houses of the Ludendorff Press.

attention. Their oversight has left a large gap in our understanding of Ludendorff and radical nationalism after 1919.

Plenty of worthy materials exist for a scholarly study of Ludendorff's life after 1925. For this dissertation, I have used Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff's publications, his personal papers written after 1925, the personal papers of some of his closest supporters, and internal communiqués from the Tannenbergbund and the Ludendorff Press. I have used NSDAP documentation addressing the Ludendorff movement and the reports of Gestapo agents commenting on Tannenbergbund meetings and Ludendorff publications. Also used in this dissertation are Sopade reports as well as the German and foreign press, all of which remain valuable gauges of German public opinion, and, in the case of the German press after 1933, of Nazi opinion. Finally, I have used internal Ludendorff Press and Tannenbergbund documents to explore the social composition of the Ludendorff movement.

Ludendorff published a tremendous amount of material. His writings tend to be repetitive and his themes are generally consistent, so from these publications a scholar may quickly and easily understand the basic assumptions of Ludendorff's ideology. These sources, however, have some problems. His memoirs suffer from a selective memory and a shaky grasp of facts and developments outside his immediate experience. His obsession with conspiracies against him, his wife, and his movement also weaken his objectivity. One can easily understand his perceptions and intentions, but it would be a mistake for a historian to rely too heavily on his historical perspective. His conclusions are wrong-headed at best and outrageous at worst.

With a few notable exceptions, the sources his supporters generated also pose problems. Ludendorff's allies tended to be as opinionated as he was, and were generally more confused about facts and conclusions. Usually they parroted Ludendorff. One exception is Robert Holtzmann. A retired army captain, Holtzmann joined the Tannenbergbund in 1927 and became the editor of Ludendorff's newspaper, the *Deutsche Wochenschau*. He soon became one of Ludendorff's closest advisors, serving as *Gauführer* (district leader) of Berlin, propaganda and information administrator for the Tannenbergbund until the end of 1928, and *Landesführer* (regional leader) of the Tannenbergbund in northeastern Germany until 1933. He also supervised the publication of another Ludendorff newspaper, the *Ludendorffs Volkswarte*, as well as other Ludendorff publications, and until 1936, he acted as liaison between Ludendorff, the military, and the Nazi regime.⁷ After World War II, the United States Army confiscated his papers. A significant portion of them, copies of the originals subsequently returned to the German Federal Archive in Koblenz, remain in the Hoover Institute at Stanford University. These copious documents are invaluable resources for the historian studying the Ludendorff movement during the Nazi regime, the finances and membership of the Tannenbergbund, neopaganism in the Third Reich, and communication between Ludendorff, the military, and the Nazi regime before Ludendorff's death in 1937. More important, the German Federal Archive has recently made available previously restricted documents from Holtzmann's papers. These previously unexamined materials are

⁷ Cursory biography of Robert Holtzmann. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), file index.

noteworthy, for they shed light on Ludendorff's communications with the Nazi regime and his attempt to advance *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* in the military.

German archives have recently released other documents, long unseen by scholars, pertaining to Ludendorff and the Nazi regime. These documents include the valuable papers of Herbert Frank and August Lindner. Frank was largely responsible for the growth of the Ludendorff movement in northwestern Germany. An engineer by training, Frank became active in various radical nationalist movements after World War I. For a short period in 1925, he joined the NSDAP, becoming the *Kreisleiter* (county leader) of Volsgau/Oberpfalz. Earlier he had been a leader in the Viking Association (*Wiking Bund*), responsible for youth propaganda. He rose through the ranks from *Ortsgruppenführer* (local group leader) to *Gauführer* of the Lower Rhine (*Niederrhein*). He was also a leader in the Stahlhelm and became a staff administrator in *Gau Rheinland*. In November 1928, Frank left the Viking Association, which by then had become a member organization of the Tannenbergbund, and became the director of publications for the Tannenbergbund *Landesleitung* (regional administration) in western Germany. In 1929, he became the *Landesführer* of Tannenbergbund West, a position he held until 1931, when his factory closed and he became unemployed. He served the Ludendorff Press as a paid lecturer and a general distributor until 1936, when he returned to his profession as an engineer.⁸ In the past scholars found Frank's papers at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich difficult to utilize because archivists there had not organized them. Only recently have they catalogued this extensive collection.

⁸ Matthais Rösch, cursory biography of Herbert Frank. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), file index.

Lindner was also an early Ludendorff supporter but held no high rank in Ludendorff's movement. He left the movement because of his distaste for Mathilde Ludendorff, so because of this attitude scholars need to view his papers with some skepticism. The papers have long been available at the German Federal Archive in Koblenz but archivists there have only recently made available to the public the portion concerning Ludendorff's opposition to Nazism. The most important documents in question consist of three drafts, written during the 1950s, of an unpublished history that investigates the interaction among the Ludendorffs, the Wehrmacht, and the Nazi regime. Lindner, intending to destroy Mathilde Ludendorff's post-World War II claim that her husband was an uncompromising opponent of the Nazi regime, undertook numerous interviews with Wehrmacht and Nazi officials as well as German historians. Lindner's history is marred by a considerable amount of animosity toward his subject, a fact that might explain why the documents in question remained hidden for so long. Yet the primary materials and historical commentary included in his file shed light on Ludendorff's intimacy with the German military and National Socialism. Furthermore, the first draft of Lindner's unpublished history duplicates the recently released portion of the Holtzmann file, so historians are able to compare the final versions of Lindner's unpublished history with his earlier drafts. Despite his prejudice, Lindner has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of Ludendorff in the Third Reich.

Scholars may find at the Ludendorff Memorial in Tutzing business documents pertaining to the Ludendorff Press, personal letters from Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff, and reports from the regional leaders and agents of the Tannenbergbund and Ludendorff Press. Franz Freiherr Karg von Bebenburg, Ludendorff's son-in-law and director of the

Verlag Hohe Warte, a descendant of the Ludendorff Press, graciously allowed me to examine a portion of his personal collection of documents. Few scholars know of this vital untapped source.

Sopade reports, police records, and the internal documentation of the Nazi party are also valuable sources. Sopade informants considered the Ludendorff movement akin to National Socialism and their reports reflect this assumption. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Political Police maintained surveillance of political meetings and nationalist rallies, and Tannenbergbund gatherings and Ludendorff's lecture tours were no exception. The police reports can be surprisingly objective and candid but scholars must exercise caution when using this material. For example, some Gestapo officials, anxious to present their districts in the best possible light, passed on inaccurate or misleading information in their reports to their superiors. The Nazi materials used in this dissertation are found in the collections of the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, the Federal German Archive in Koblenz, as well as the Bavarian State Archive and the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich.

Also helpful as a historical source is the German press. Newspapers in Germany openly published political commentaries. Political parties, nationalist organizations, interest groups, and the Catholic Church either owned or controlled their own newspapers in order to disseminate their versions and interpretations of events. After World War I Ludendorff himself controlled a number of newspapers and journals, in which he published his radical nationalist ideology. His publications reached a wide audience, and rival publications responded to his accusations. German newspapers often did battle with each other and attacked their rivals' ideologies, strategies, and character. The German

press, therefore, shaped and resolved political debate during the interwar years.

Ludendorff, even if not taken seriously by ordinary Germans, had access to a wide audience since other papers reprinted segments of his writings and reported, either in earnest or in jest, on his activities. The National Socialist organ, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, printed numerous articles on Ludendorff and the Tannenbergbund. From its reporting, one may see how Nazis regarded Ludendorff and his movement.

After World War II, the Federal Republic of Germany, suspecting collaboration with the Nazi regime, investigated Mathilde Ludendorff and a few of her closest allies. The documents pertaining to the investigation of her, housed in the Bavarian State Archives, enable scholars to trace the development of the Ludendorff movement during the Third Reich. Her and her followers' interviews as well as the judgments of the investigating judges describe the occupations, education, and beliefs of Ludendorff's radical nationalist supporters.

Scholars need to re-examine Ludendorff's contributions to the development of Nazism after 1925, for before and during the Third Reich he and his followers had a positive impact on the growth of the party as well as the dissemination of racist, anti-Semitic, militarist, and neopagan ideology in the military and among the general public. Although he might have thought Hitler a demagogue and Nazism vulgar, Ludendorff grudgingly accepted the political successes of the NSDAP. A military man, he did not understand modern mass politics, but most of his followers felt at ease with the Nazi regime, and some became quite happy within the NSDAP. Furthermore, he was responsible for aiding the evolution of the Wehrmacht into a radical nationalist organization on the eve of World War II. Before the Nazis acquired power most

Germans considered his ideas merely extreme, but in the Third Reich Ludendorff's beliefs, after initial prohibition, became permissible and were even encouraged officially. Once in power, the NSDAP permitted the broad dissemination of his anti-Christian, neopagan, militaristic, and anti-Semitic ideology. Despite occasional restrictions on his freedom, Ludendorff enjoyed an extraordinary amount of liberty to publish, demonstrating that in this instance Nazism allowed a dissenting voice to continue to speak his mind.

Chapter 1

The Founding of the Tannenbergbund

Freedom cannot be achieved without a solution to the Jewish question!¹

-- Erich Ludendorff, in Regensburg at the founding of the Tannenbergbund, 1925

There are men who can be so obsessed with one thing that nothing in the world is able to dissuade them. For them there is no consideration for others but only their single "I". They do not acknowledge the greatest minds of all time and carelessly pass them by. Ludendorff is this sort of man.²

-- The *Landauer Volksblatt*, October 6, 1927

In the summer of 1925, Adolf Hitler, the undisputed leader of the newly reconstituted NSDAP, deftly squeezed Erich Ludendorff out of the party after the old warrior performed dismally in the presidential campaign that May. Frustrated by Hitler's political maneuvering, Ludendorff desperately sought to regain his former political standing. In late August 1925, at a commemoration of the German victory in the August 1914 Battle of Tannenberg, an invitation to return to the political arena appeared. The guest speaker, retired General Walter Siegfried Bronsart von Schellendorff and retired Colonel Konstantin Hierl suggested to Ludendorff that he form a federation of existing

¹ Erich Ludendorff, *Feldherrnworte*, vol. 2 (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1938), 23.

völkisch veteran's groups and youth organizations dedicated to advancing his political beliefs and social values. Isolated on the fringes of the nationalist and *völkisch* movement by Hitler's political schemes, Ludendorff immediately heeded their advice. Hoping to resurrect his political fortunes and anxious to compete against the NSDAP, in September 1925 Ludendorff, with Schellendorff and Hierl's help, founded the Tannenbergbund.³

He, Schellendorff, and Hierl intended the new organization to parallel Hitler's. The Tannenbergbund appealed to a broad radical nationalist base, for Ludendorff enjoyed the widespread support of numerous radical nationalist veterans' organizations, which idolized him and fondly remembered his leadership during World War I. He also enjoyed the support of many Nazis; it appears that Nazis, despite Hitler's insistence on isolating the NSDAP from other radical nationalist organizations, were greatly interested in Ludendorff's organization and actively sought to reconcile Hitler and Ludendorff in order to unify the radical German nationalist movement. Yet the support of these men was not enough to offset the flaws in Ludendorff's organization since most of them found Nazism equally appealing. His belligerent anti-Catholicism weakened his organization and

² *Landauer Volksblatt*, October 6, 1927. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

³ To date, no comprehensive scholarly study of the Tannenbergbund exists. One can find the best analyses of the structure of the Tannenbergbund in Richard Mayo D. Piazza, "Ludendorff: The Totalitarian and Voelkisch Politics of a Military Specialist." (Ph.D. diss. Northwestern University, 1969), and in Gert Borst's "Die Ludendorff-Bewegung, 1919-1961: Eine Analyse monologer Kommunikationsformen in der sozialen Zeitkommunikation," (doctoral diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, 1969). The following discussion of the Tannenbergbund's structure relies heavily on their conclusions.

inadvertently strengthened Nazism, which became a home for radical nationalist Catholics disgusted by his diatribes against the Church.

Disagreements over tactics and ideology often arose between the Tannenbergbund and the NSDAP, but before 1928, both organizations generally approved of each other. Relations between Ludendorff and the Nazi leadership remained cordial. In that year, both Hitler and Ludendorff centralized their authoritarian leadership over their respective movements. Ludendorff also moved his organization away from politics and increased its emphasis on *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* (German Perception of God), his wife Mathilde's esoteric racist, anti-Semitic, and vaguely neopagan philosophy. This shift in strategy intensified the competition between the NSDAP and the Tannenbergbund, for now both organizations had distinctive identities, leaders, and approaches toward achieving their largely identical goals: to abrogate the Treaty of Versailles, to rearm the military, to eliminate Marxism, and to create a *völkisch* German society. Led by an aloof and impractical leader who cared more about the German soul and supranational conspiracies than political success, the Tannenbergbund could not compete against the more dynamic and popular Nazi party. The Tannenbergbund became a home for disgruntled nationalists and former Nazis who worshipped Ludendorff and disliked Hitler's heavy-handed authoritarian leadership.

Founding members and social composition of the Tannenbergbund

Structural defects also limited the potency of Ludendorff's federation. Prior to Ludendorff's restructuring of the Tannenbergbund in 1928, member organizations had a considerable amount of freedom to act in their own interests. Ludendorff had originally

assembled the Tannenbergbund as a voluntary paramilitary federation generally consisting of radical nationalist veterans' organizations, but civilians with no military experience soon joined his movement. Some of the early members of the Tannenbergbund, including Ludendorff himself, already had extensive experience with the NSDAP. Hierl joined the *völkisch* movement in the summer of 1924 when he met Ernst Röhm, the leader of the Nazi Stormtroopers (*Sturmabteilung*, or SA). Before he founded the Tannenbergbund, Ludendorff shared the leadership of the German-*Völkisch* Freedom Party (*Deutschvölkische Freiheitspartei*, or DVFP) with Röhm, NSDAP leader Gregor Strasser, and Albrecht von Graefe, leader of the German-*Völkisch* Freedom Movement (*Deutschvölkische Freiheitsbewegung*, or DVFB).

Indeed, most founding member organizations of the Tannenbergbund owed their existence to either Ludendorff or Röhm. After the Hitler Putsch, the German-*Völkisch* Officers' Association (*Deutschvölkische Offiziersbund*), under Ludendorff's tutelage in Bavaria, had coalesced around the remnants of the German Officers' Association (*Deutschen Offiziersbund*). The constellation of the Frontring, the Front Warriors' Association (*Frontkriegerbund*), and Röhm's Frontbann, elements of which had already merged with SA formations, had formed in 1924 a federation under the joint patronage of Röhm and Ludendorff. The Old Reich Banner (*Altreichsflagge*) organization, which under Röhm's leadership had detached itself from the Reich Banner (*Reichsflagge*) organization in 1923, joined the Tannenbergbund as well.⁴ Only one major Tannenbergbund member organization, the Hindenburg Union (*Verband Hindenburg*) of

⁴ Hans Buchheim, *Gutachten des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1958), 356.

Schleswig, did not owe its creation to either Ludendorff or Röhm. Radical German nationalists in the 1920s belonged to a close-knit family. Ludendorff's towering paternal figure as a radical nationalist unified this confusing clan of paramilitary malcontents.

With himself as *Schirmherr* and chief of the Ludendorff Press, and with Schellendorff as *Bundesführer* (national leader), Ludendorff grouped the member organizations of the Tannenbergbund in eight *Länder*, or regions: North (Oldenburg, Hanover, Schleswig-Holstein, Braunschweig, Mecklenburg, Pomerania, and northern Saxony-Anhalt), East (East Prussia and Danzig), Southeast (Saxony and Silesia), Greater Berlin and Brandenburg, Center (southern Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, Hesse-Nassau, and the Main valley), South (Bavaria), Southwest (Württemberg, Baden, and Hesse), and West (Westphalia and the Rhineland). In the early 1930s, the Greater Berlin and Brandenburg region acquired Pomerania from Tannenbergbund North, forming Tannenbergbund Northeast. Each *Land* was subdivided into *Gaue*, or districts, which were further subdivided into *Orte*, or localities. The Ludendorff Press also conformed to this hierarchical structure, with a general distributor in each *Land*, lesser distributors in the *Gaue*, and booksellers in the *Orte*.⁵

It is difficult to measure the social composition of the Tannenbergbund. Few complete and comprehensive membership rolls that include members' occupations, social backgrounds, and levels of education, exist. With the amount of data available, however, we can reach some tentative conclusions concerning the Tannenbergbund's elite. The Tannenbergbund leadership generally came from the army officer corps, but the general

⁵ Piazza, "Ludendorff," 118.

membership had a more mixed social background. Piazza writes that most members of the Tannenbergbund came from the middle class, although representatives from all social classes participated in the Ludendorff movement.⁶ His conclusion is questionable because it is based on figures for Ludendorff Press lecturers compiled for the Reich Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*, or SD) in 1938, after the Nazi regime legalized the Ludendorff movement. Yet because of the nature of their work, lecturers for the Ludendorff Press tended to be more educated than other supporters of the movement, and therefore tended to represent the professional classes. Indeed, close to one third of all lecturers were teachers, professors, and headmasters, while another quarter consisted of lawyers, judges, and medical doctors.

It is more difficult to reach broad conclusions concerning the social composition of the Tannenbergbund's general membership. A few intriguing clues exist. In 1933, after the organization's decline, the following sixty-three members of Tannenbergbund East received publications from the Ludendorff Press: ten independent farmers, ten landowners, three foresters, three cabinet makers, three dentists, three postal administrators, three teachers, three shop-keepers, two city administrators, two customs officials, a gardener, a surveyor, a potter, a doctor, an editor, a telegraph inspector, a bank official, a pension-distributor, a cartographer, a veterinarian, a retired officer, a house painter, an accountant, a laborer, a furnace-maker, a shoemaker, a pensioner, a legal secretary, a boat-builder, a barber, and an owner of a tree nursery.⁷ It also appears that

⁶ Ibid., 119-20.

⁷ Recipients of Tannenbergbund orders in *Landesverband Ost*, April 15, 1933. LG, folder K/IIc.

women generally comprised forty to sixty percent of all attendees of some Ludendorff Press lectures.⁸

These samplings, along with those of Piazza, are too restricted to provide a reliable index to the organization as a whole, but the samples demonstrate that in eastern Germany in 1933 one third of his supporters were farmers and landowners, with a significant number of teachers, administrators, doctors, artisans, and owners of small businesses. Few civil servants belong to this cohort, perhaps indicating that in 1933 most civil servants realized allegiance to Hitler, not Ludendorff, provided security. It also appears that Ludendorff benefited from the main constituency of the *Landvolk* movement: dissatisfied farmers and landowners financially wounded by the slump in agricultural prices during the 1920s and early 1930s.⁹ It is uncertain why these individuals chose to support Ludendorff instead of other figures, but it is clear that, in general, the social base of the Ludendorff movement was similar to that which gave the NSDAP its broadest support.

⁸ Attendance figures for the Königsberg *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* convention, February 10-13, 1933. LG, folder K/IIc.

⁹ For more on the *Landvolk* movement, see Otto-Ernst Schüddekopf, *Linke Leute von Rechts: Die nationalrevolutionären Minderheiten und der Kommunismus in der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960), 306-9. See also chapter 3, "The Political Movements among the Rural People in Schleswig-Holstein, 1918 to 1932," in Rudolf Heberle, *From Democracy to Nazism: A Regional Case Study on Political Parties in Germany* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1970), 32-89.

Deutsche Gotterkenntnis

Despite their similar social composition, the Tannenbergbund's spiritual and philosophical elements would eventually demarcate and separate it from other radical nationalist movements, including Nazism. In the founding statement describing the goals of the Tannenbergbund, Hierl wrote in 1926 that the Tannenbergbund prepared the German people in their struggle for both "internal and external" liberation by cultivating their defensive responsibilities (*Wehrhaftigkeit*), strengthening their senses of honor and self, and fighting against "international pacifism." He claimed that the Tannenbergbund, as the "leavening" for the "nationalist classes" of the German people, "raised" a new, vocal nationalism. The new organization understood that it had embraced a difficult task, but it promised that it would not lose sight of its goals when confronted by petty everyday squabbles. More important, Hierl insisted that the size of Ludendorff's organization was irrelevant; the strength of its ideas and the organization's will to fight for them remained paramount.¹⁰ From its inception, Ludendorff had designed the Tannenbergbund to transform Germany through uncompromising struggle.

Throughout the late 1920s, Ludendorff advocated *völkisch* spiritual renewal as described by his wife Mathilde Spiess von Kemnitz, whom he met through Rudolf Heß in October 1923 and married on September 14, 1926. Although obscure and confusing, her philosophy mesmerized Ludendorff, who became quite taken with her theorizing. He became her most ardent champion and supported her unconditionally; her intellect entranced him and led him to believe that her philosophy was the vehicle for the spiritual

¹⁰ Buchheim, *Gutachten*, 357.

awakening of the German *Volk*. Their union was more than just a marriage; it was for the Ludendorffs a historic mission to preserve the German nation. Her *völkisch* philosophy and his *völkisch* nationalism merged.

The product was anti-Semitic, a prejudice that served as the intellectual foundation for the Ludendorffs' uncompromising racist, isolationist, militarist, anti-Christian thought. Tannenbergbund members followed an aggressive ideology that demanded the elimination of Jewish and Catholic influence in German affairs and the expansion of German power. They supported German rearmament in order to reestablish German military superiority in Central Europe, wanted Germany to reconquer lost territories, and expected Germany to acquire new territories for colonization and agricultural production. Their xenophobic ideology looked inward: it believed that the German people could only achieve freedom by expelling foreign influences from Germany.

A self-styled German theologian with a medical education, Mathilde Ludendorff was a practicing psychiatrist who served in an officer's hospital during World War I. Prior to World War I, and early in her academic career, she became interested in the scientific study of religion. In her studies, she learned to explain religious belief by rationally and scientifically analyzing religious texts, which she considered historical documents that reflected the culture of a religion's social environment. She claimed to base her new spiritual and philosophical system upon Germanic pagan beliefs, the philosophies of Kant and Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. Her ideology, which she called *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*, recommended a return to pre-Christian Germanic values, morality, and customs. The German *Volk*, she believed, had

lost its distinctive soul when Germany became Christian. According to her doctrine, the *Volk* inherited its spirituality, so for Germany to regain confidence, spiritual strength, and material greatness it had to expel the alien influences of Christianity, Judaism, and the French Enlightenment. Through the religious and philosophical development of a particularly German spirituality rooted in the distant past, Mathilde Ludendorff had proven, according to her husband, that strict adherence to racial unity and a unique conception of the divine would inevitably lead to German liberation.¹¹

Mathilde Ludendorff considered herself a scientist. Like Houston Stewart Chamberlain, she attacked Darwinists because she believed they assumed that all human actions corresponded to the same behavioral and physical actions as savage animals. Human action, in Chamberlain's opinion, was more meaningful than the instinctive, banal activities of animals.¹² For the same reasons she objected to Freudians because she thought they over-emphasized the bestial and irrational nature of mankind. According to Piazza, she insisted that humanity was unique since irrepressible will, which men possessed and animals lacked, separated men from beasts.¹³ Although she was not a Nazi, her emphasis on the human will to succeed and dominate differed little from the fascist belief in the power of the will. In this respect, Piazza's conclusion supports Aurel Kolnai's thesis that National Socialists viewed humanity as a "glorious manifestation of

¹¹ Mathilde Ludendorff, *Der letzte Weg des Feldherrn Erich Ludendorff* (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1938), 1.

¹² Geoffrey G. Field, *Evangelist of Race: The Germanic Vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 281.

¹³ Piazza, "Ludendorff," 123-25.

nature” with the “potentiality for development and expansion displayed in his finest specimens and noblest creations.”¹⁴

Deutsche Gotterkenntnis was a racist and elitist ideology. By delving deeply into her racial past, she claimed she had retrieved a spiritual system that would save the German people from the confusing, soulless materialism of modern society. According to her, humanity consisted of numerous *Völker*. The spontaneous enlightenment of an extraordinary individual consequently laid the spiritual foundation for future generations of his or her Volk. This extraordinary individual’s racial awareness contributed to the spiritual enlightenment of his or her *Volk*, and therefore belonged to the entire *völkisch* racial community.

All steps of individual beings upward to consciousness have been created by a flare-up of divine will in one being among the hecatombs of similarly formed living beings. According to the same natural laws, the first God-experience has not been born in all preceding beings, but only in the most God-aware among their kin. In the same way, for as long as humans have lived, all other steps of creation until the present are fixed in the sub-consciousness of racial inheritance. The same can also be said of the first experience of God himself on the generations, with all its consequences on the ‘hereditary character,’ the racial inheritance of a race and the racial character of a nation.¹⁵

From her argument, it is obvious that she considered herself a prophet destined to transform the spirituality of the German people. Both she and her husband understood that she carried divine inspiration for the spiritual enlightenment of Germany and assumed she was aware of the divine only because she understood her racial heritage.

¹⁴ Aurel Kolnai, *The War against the West* (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), 178.

¹⁵ Mathilde Ludendorff, *The Soul of Man*, trans. Walter Grossinger, 2nd ed. (Pähl, Germany: Verlag Hohe Warte, 1941), 21. I have improved the translation.

Borrowing from Hegel, she further argued that as the manifestation of the nation, only a powerful state that embraced *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*, racial unity, and a *völkisch* culture founded on pre-modern ideals could protect the *Volk*.¹⁶ She concluded that only one person with an intimate connection to the divine soul of the German people could lead this powerful state. Erich Ludendorff, intimately connected through his wife to the soul of the German people, was that leader.

Seen in this light, *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* was a fundamental component of what Kolnai called “tribal nationalism.” According to Kolnai, the “supra-individual body,” or national community, contained a “mystical genius” which transcended individuality.¹⁷ His concept of “mystical genius” pertains to the inherent and inherited spirituality of a race unsatisfied with mere patriotism but demanding its members’ “faith.” The Ludendorffs’ *Weltanschauung* was not unique in Germany. Since the end of the nineteenth century and especially after World War I, similar ideas circulated among intellectuals, who later popularized them. The Ludendorffs’ ideology, like many other radical nationalist ideas emerging from the Conservative Revolution during the interwar years, was an amalgamation of thought proposed by earlier thinkers such as Chamberlain, Paul de Lagarde, Otto Weininger, and Julius Langbehn. Conservative Revolutionaries such as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, Ernst Jünger, Edgar Jung, Carl Schmitt, Alfred

¹⁶ Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff, “Freiheit oder Kollektiv?” in *Die Judenmacht - ihr Wesen und Ende*, eds. Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1939), 448.

¹⁷ Kolnai, *War against the West*, 395.

Rosenberg, and the Ludendorffs expanded on these ideas conceived by the previous generation.

Piazza concludes that Mathilde Ludendorff made the Tannenbergbund unique because no other *völkisch* writers were as educated or scholarly as she was.¹⁸ Piazza's claim, however, must be qualified. Moeller and Edgar Jung advanced similar ideas as they made important intellectual contributions to the Conservative Revolution. However, her emphasis on national spiritual renewal based upon the restoration of ancient Germanic spiritual beliefs and traditional values set her apart from other Conservative Revolutionaries. No other radical nationalists attempted to formulate such a complex theology or philosophy. Edgar Jung advanced a similar argument but did not do so with the same intellectual rigor as she. Piazza argues that other self-styled radical conservative or fascist intellectuals, Nazis included, were either unable or unwilling to imitate her style. For the average German reader who casually glanced at her work, her writings appeared to be the work of an educated, erudite, and well-respected scholar dissatisfied with the modern world.¹⁹ Piazza's conclusion is questionable; it is difficult to determine ordinary Germans' attitude toward her work.

Her spiritual ideas were extreme, but during the interwar years well-known contemporary psychologists such as Carl Jung advanced similar ideas. Claiming that ethnic groups and races had consciousness and that they inherited from their ancestors fundamental religious and spiritual beliefs, Carl Jung insisted that the unconscious

¹⁸ Piazza, "Ludendorff," 123.

¹⁹ Ibid., 123.

contained more than mere suppressed personal material; it also contained deeper social material intimately connected with what Franklin L. Baumer calls the “greater-than-individual.” Jung’s “collective unconscious” emerged in religious dreams, symbols, and myths held by all humanity.²⁰ Seen in this context, Mathilde’s ideology does not appear as distinctive as she and others believed. Indeed, they paralleled Carl Jung’s provocative psychological theories of her era.

Mathilde was distinctive in that she, using her husband’s stature as a celebrated radical nationalist, embarked on a political program designed to advance her theories and transform German society. Her husband was able to popularize the ideals associated with the Conservative Revolution. The journals, newspapers, and other publications distributed by the Ludendorff Press and the Tannenbergbund gave her a medium to present her philosophical works. No other contemporary psychologist or philosopher attempted to pursue such an ambitious goal.

Judeo-Christian religion and the *Volk*

The Ludendorffs’ anti-Christian creed was more than just an anti-clerical argument against the social and political influence wielded by Christian clerics. Their words and deeds, as well as those of their anti-Christian contemporaries, went beyond those of Otto von Bismarck’s failed *Kulturkampf* of the 1870s. They did not seek to control Christianity; they meant to destroy it. Throughout Germany in the 1920s and 1930s various movements abandoning the Jewish roots of Christianity and professing

²⁰ Franklin L. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Skepticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1960), 255.

either Aryan Christian or neopagan faiths emerged. The German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*) and Jakob Wilhelm Hauer's German Faith Movement (*Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*) are two examples of such movements. Chamberlain sought to prove that Jesus was not Jewish,²¹ and Rosenberg advanced Chamberlain's and Lagarde's desire to found a church based on Germanic values.²² The German Christians was one such Aryan Christian movement that sought to separate Christianity from its Judaic roots and establish a racist religion in which Christ epitomized the ideal Aryan man.²³

The neopagan movements, of which *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* was only one, were more successful. By completely rejecting Christianity, they liberated themselves from Christian morality and theology. They sought to create a *völkisch* theology based upon pre-Christian Germanic values, customs, and beliefs elevated and made popular by late nineteenth century intellectuals such as Lagarde and Richard Wagner. *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* differed from other neopagan movements because Mathilde Ludendorff

²¹ Field, *Evangelist of Race*, 182-83.

²² Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft: Der Weg des Irrationalismus von Schelling zu Hitler* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1955), 562-63. For a short analysis of Rosenberg's contribution to Nazi ideology, see Richard Bollmus, "Alfred Rosenberg: National Socialism's 'Chief Ideologue?'" in *The Nazi Elite*, ed. Ronald Smelser and Rainer Zitelmann, trans. Mary Fischer (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

²³ J. S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1968) and Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979) remain the foundations in English for any study of Christianity in the Third Reich. For recent interpretations of the German Christian movement, see Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996) and Susannah Heschel, "Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life," *Church History* 63, no. 4 (1994): 587-605.

tried to ground her neopaganism on a solid historical and scholarly foundation. Her conclusions were rarely defensible, but anti-Christians found them appealing.

In the distant past, according to followers of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*, foreigners, intending to enslave the *Volk* and prevent it from achieving greatness, imposed Christian beliefs on the Germans. This scheme deformed German spirituality; prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries Germanic peoples, in awe of the natural world around them, had developed their intellects and had cultivated a profound respect for nature. They lived in harmony with nature and had lost “all their fears of spirits and death.” Mathilde Ludendorff argued that when missionaries entered the Germanic world of Northern Europe, they extinguished the ancient Germans’ maturing spiritual awareness and replaced it with superstition and fear of death.²⁴ Once Germans expelled Christianity from German soil, she argued, the German people would find their confidence restored.

As a first step toward eliminating Christianity from Germany, the Ludendorffs interpreted Christian religious holidays as ancient Germanic ceremonies and rituals. Here they stood on solid historical ground, but they took great pains to reassure their followers that even though pagan religious holidays often fell on Christian holidays they were in fact Germanic in nature. Germans, they insisted, ought to consider such holidays Germanic, not Christian, and with each act of remembrance Germans strengthened their racial awareness and weakened Christianity’s hold on the *Volk*.²⁵ Erich Ludendorff

²⁴ Mathilde Ludendorff, *The Triumph of the Immortal-Will*, trans. Alice Brechta (Tutzing: Selbstverlag Dr. M. Ludendorff, n.d.), 220-21.

²⁵ Erich Ludendorff, “Der Weihenachtsbaum - die Weltenesche,” in *Weihenachten, im Lichte der Rasseerkenntnis*, ed. Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1936), 9

wrote, “Indeed, parents’ words to the young on the meaning of the fir tree on Christmas Eve could, in our day, lead to a recovery from the dangerous influences of foreign races and thoughts.”²⁶ Remembering ancient rituals liberated Germans from foreign domination.

The Ludendorffs’ hatred for Christianity stemmed directly from their anti-Semitism. Mathilde Ludendorff, like many of her Conservative Revolutionary contemporaries, insisted that each race had its own inherent peculiarities of belief and behavior, and like many of her contemporaries, she considered Judaism fundamentally hostile to not only the German people but also other racial communities. Judaism wielded a powerful and wide-ranging malevolent influence in the Ludendorffs’ universe. It was the invisible puppeteer behind the global political and economic scenes. Indeed, the general swore in court that he believed in the authenticity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.²⁷

The Ludendorffs insisted that Judaism actively pursued world domination since the Jewish God commanded it. “For a long time Yahweh was pleased with his chosen people,” Ludendorff wrote. “The Jewish people subjugated men and nations for him and collectivized them, made them so desperate to praise God that they lost their individuality.”²⁸ Erich Ludendorff insisted that the secret rituals of Freemasonry derived from ancient Jewish customs and that the Jews had instituted the Masonic mysteries since

²⁶ Ibid., 11.

²⁷ Piazza, “Ludendorff,” 132.

²⁸ Ludendorff, *Feldherrnworte*, vol. 3, 6.

“the Jew must create ‘secret fraternities’” in order to influence the “tractable masses.”²⁹ Occult practices and fraternal organizations were Jewish institutions created to numb Germans and make them unaware of Jewish machinations. The Ludendorffs came to believe that Judaism controlled all conspiracies, be they Catholic, Masonic, or Marxist. “There is only one Christianity,” wrote the general, “just as there is only one Freemasonry - and both are Jewish.”³⁰ In another instance, he argued that Christianity, the occult, Freemasonry, Marxism, Bolshevism, capitalism, and “Jewish economic theories” heated the Jewish melting pot which subsumed distinctive individual nations into an unexceptional internationalist blend.³¹ Through Christianity Judaism consciously aspired to eradicate racial awareness and enslave the world.

With Germany’s defeat in World War I, the creation of the Weimar Republic, and the subsequent economic collapse during the Great Depression, the Ludendorffs believed that the end game, a sort of racial Armageddon, was finally at hand. According to them, Judaism had deliberately weakened Germany after World War I. According to the Ludendorffs Germany, the last free nation infiltrated by Masonic lodges and Christianity, was dangerously close to losing not only its freedom but also its distinctiveness as a spiritual community:

The degradation of Germans of both sexes, with the cooperation of the racist, political, and capitalist elements of the Jewish people, was only

²⁹ Erich Ludendorff, “Okkultwahn züngelt von Asien nach dem Westen,” in *Europa den Asiatenpriestern?* ed. Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1938), 5-6.

³⁰ Ludendorff, *Feldherrnworte*, vol. 3, 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

possible once the German people had been uprooted by a thousand years of Christianity, ruled by an ancient oriental state and legal interpretations, their blood and old high culture forgotten, unable to be remembered . . .³²

Instead of strengthening their political base, the Ludendorffs irrationally spent a tremendous amount of energy trying to destroy imaginary Masonic and Christian conspiracies. They honestly believed that it was their duty to unmask the “*überstaatliche Mächte*,” or “supranational powers,” behind these imaginary conspiracies and thereby liberate the German people. Once the Ludendorffs exposed the diabolical machinations of the Masons and the Jesuits, Germany would be closer to revealing Judaism’s true nature and therefore closer to liberation.

Although Ludendorff was not always consistent, for he also argued that Saint Ignatius was responsible for unifying Buddhism and Christianity,³³ the Ludendorffs’ anti-Semitic literature found an audience. Their publications were not unique; there were plenty of other anti-Semitic agitators throughout Germany, and the Ludendorff Press was only one publishing house among many which distributed anti-Semitic propaganda. The Ludendorff’s publications occupied the middle ground between the intellectually more rigorous works of Chamberlain and the more vulgar anti-Semitism of Julius Streicher. The Ludendorffs differed from other anti-Semites, however, in their tremendously self-righteous effort to rationalize their accusations, prove their arguments, and publicize their conclusions.

³² Erich Ludendorff, *Vernichtung der Freimaurerei durch Enthüllung ihrer Geheimnisse*, 2nd ed. (Pähl: Verlag Hohe Warte, 1957), 12.

³³ Erich Ludendorff, *Römische “volksnähe” Aktion* (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1937), 10.

Fundamental weaknesses of the Ludendorff movement

To prosper, the Tannenbergbund needed more than anti-Semitic screeds and *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*. Ludendorff's decision to compete in the arena of radical German nationalist politics without the support of other recognized radical nationalist leaders such as Hitler, Strasser, Graefe, or Ernst Graf zu Reventlow, was fateful because Ludendorff lacked the political skills necessary for victory. In 1924, before he established the Tannenbergbund, radical nationalist critics had already condemned his Prussian background and his stance on Catholicism. The following debate led a few radical nationalists to question his suitability as a national politician. Ludendorff also disturbed nationalists who believed he advocated a powerful centralized state that ignored regional interests and the sovereignty of the German states. For example, some in Lower Saxony worried that Ludendorff and his allies cared little for Germans of all regions. An announcement in a Lower Saxon newspaper proclaimed that "[Ludendorff and his allies'] goals are not the same as those found in our Lower Saxon-Hanoverian homeland, since they are not greater Germans (*großdeutsch*), but Prussian chauvinists (*preußisch-partikularistisch*)."³⁴

Radical nationalists in Bavaria also found it difficult to reconcile his Prussian ancestry with his standing as a national politician.³⁵ He had unwittingly tapped into an underlying vein of discontent within Bavarian society, which believed that northern

³⁴ Undated (1925?) announcement from an unidentified newspaper. BA, Zsg. 103/8601 (Ludendorff, Erich).

³⁵ *Volkszeitung für Meissen*, August 4, 1926. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

Germans, and especially Prussians, did not respect the interests and traditions of Bavarians. Indeed, in the years immediately following World War I, tension increased between the Reich government in Berlin, wishing to consolidate its power over the various German *Länder*, and the Bavarian government in Munich, wishing to protect its autonomy.³⁶ A demonstration of this tension occurred on September 29, 1924, when the Catholic and nationalist Bavarian People's Party (*Bayerische Volkspartei*, or BVP) organized a *Bauerntag* - a peasants' day celebration - in Pöcking, Bavaria. Nearly three thousand peasants, as well as some Austrians and the Bavarian Minister of the Interior, Karl Stützel, attended the celebration and heard numerous political speeches listing the threats to Bavarian peasantry. The keynote speaker, a Dr. Horlacher, claimed, "Ludendorff's centralism is, for us, the greatest danger. Only an independent confederation of German states, which Austria could also join as an independent confederate state, could lead us forward again." Another speaker at the *Bauerntag* asserted, "We will not tolerate it when people, who never once belonged to us, want to bring us a new *völkisch* culture. When we are Christian, nationalist, and true to the old customs, we will be truly *völkisch*."³⁷ Bavarian nationalists at the celebration certainly did not consider Ludendorff a *völkisch* leader in the Bavarian sense.

³⁶ For a synopsis of the political tension between Bavarian separatists and the Weimar Republic, see David Clay Large, *Where Ghosts Walked: Munich's Road to the Third Reich* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 142-46.

³⁷ Both quotations taken from the *Münchener Post*, October 2, 1924. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1463, roll 63 (Polizei-Direktion München - Bayerische Politische Polizei). I have been unable to discover more about Dr. Horlacher.

Other Bavarian nationalists, fearing that Ludendorff's inflammatory rhetoric and antagonistic publications threatened to tear apart the nation, looked beyond their parochial concerns to the effect Ludendorff had on the whole of Germany. The *Bayerisches Vaterland*, a Bavarian nationalist newspaper, called him the "Destroyer of the Reich" and printed a letter that stated: "Because of the tactless deeds of a man who would break the tentative solidarity of Protestants, Catholics, and other faiths, Socialist and non-socialist, we have now unfortunately come to the point where unity will be destroyed by the rot of internal agitation and decay. This will lead to the danger of Germany's disintegration."³⁸ The next day, evoking the terrors of the Thirty Years' War, the *Bayerischer Kurier*, an important Catholic newspaper and one of Ludendorff's most consistent critics, printed an editorial stating: "Ludendorff threatens to shred Germany into Catholic and Protestant parts that would face each other with hate and again make Germany a smoldering pile of rubble."³⁹

Ludendorff's anti-Catholic agitation also threatened his legitimacy as a truly national politician. South German Catholics, especially in Bavaria, found his anti-Catholic propaganda distasteful and disturbing. He had unwittingly initiated wider discussion concerning the relationship between *völkisch* racism and Catholicism, for Catholics not associated with radical nationalism insisted that the debate among the *Völkischen* concerned them as well. The *Augsburger Post-Zeitung*, Catholic and critical

³⁸ *Bayerisches Vaterland*, October 6, 1924. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1463, roll 63 (Polizei-Direktion München - Bayerische Politische Polizei).

³⁹ *Bayerischer Kurier*, October 7, 1924. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1463, roll 63 (Polizei-Direktion München - Bayerische Politische Polizei).

of radical German nationalism, argued that “as far as what ‘*völkisch*’ means - to love the Fatherland - the heart’s blood completely seals it, and since hundreds of thousands of Catholics fallen in the World War speak such a forceful language, their love of Fatherland needs no further comment.”⁴⁰

On the other side of the conflict, radical nationalists pained themselves to reconcile their Catholicism with their nationalist agitation. Nationalist Catholics accused Ludendorff of initiating a new *Kulturkampf*, a term that appeared frequently in the Bavarian press. The *Bayerischer Kurier* believed it to be impossible: “Day in and day out, the *völkischen* press and *völkischen* assemblies continue to abuse Catholics. Thus the question remains: can a Catholic belong to the *Völkischen* Party? It has been long apparent from the facts that the answer is a thousand times ‘no.’”⁴¹ Although the *Bayerischer Kurier* was Bavaria’s leading Catholic newspaper and therefore had an interest in exposing anti-Catholicism, the newspaper had substantial influence over all political aspects of Bavarian public opinion.

Völkisch Bavarians found themselves in a dilemma: they were unsure if they could be both *völkisch* and Catholic at the same time. It is likely that most hedged their bets. In front of a *völkisch* meeting of one thousand people at the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich at the end of April 1924, a regional leader of the *völkisch* movement in Bavaria tried to distance himself from Ludendorff’s anti-Catholicism even as he tried adroitly to

⁴⁰ *Augsburger Post-Zeitung*, April 26, 1924. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1467, roll 64 (Polizei-Direktion München - Bayerische Politische Polizei).

⁴¹ *Bayerischer Kurier*, April 25, 1924. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1467, roll 64 (Polizei-Direktion München - Bayerische Politische Polizei).

qualify Ludendorff's anti-Catholic rhetoric, arguing that the *Völkischen* were not against Catholicism, but against the union of Catholicism and politics.⁴² This qualification shows that the debate surrounding Ultramontanism in Germany still resonated decades after the *Kulturkampf*. Radical German nationalism during the interwar years forced many German nationalists to clarify their position on the role religion played in politics. Even before he founded the Tannenbergbund, radical nationalist Bavarians as well as radical nationalist Catholics approached Ludendorff with skepticism. Catholic nationalists refused to throw him their support and instead turned to the NSDAP, which declined to debate the relationship between radical nationalism and religion.⁴³

Erich Ludendorff's reputation in the mainstream German press

The general German public had little sympathy for Ludendorff, his followers, and *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*. Since Ludendorff occupied a segment of the radical nationalist movement, which at the time resided on the fringes of German politics, the German press had little incentive to pay him any attention. Yet because of his enormous historical significance, his abrasive personality, and his amusing antics, the press found him tremendously interesting. His tirades against the Church, as well as the Freemasons, kept his name in the mainstream German press. The ensuing public debates injured the man's

⁴² Report of the Munich Bürgerbräukeller meeting of April 25, 1924 from the Bavarian local police, Munich Department, April 26, 1924. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1467, roll 64 (Polizei-Direktion München - Bayerische Politische Polizei).

⁴³ Some scholars have recently suggested that some Catholic regions of Germany were less resistant to Nazism than generally assumed. See Oded Heilbrunner, *Catholicism, Political Culture, and the Countryside. A Social History of the Nazi Party in South Germany* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998).

reputation among average Germans. Handfuls of Ludendorff's supporters published attacks of their own against the mainstream German press, thereby escalating the conflict. The influential *Bayerischer Kurier* constantly ridiculed him and his movement. Other publications, as well as some well-known contemporary writers such as Kurt Tucholsky, brutally satirized Ludendorff's obsessions with conspiracies and continued their scornful and sometimes comical coverage of Ludendorff's mishaps until 1933. The bulk of German society considered Ludendorff either a national amusement or a national embarrassment. For them, his behavior was not consistent with that of a highly respected national leader. Ludendorff never had an opportunity to reach a broad and sympathetic audience.

Journalists' interest in his well-known feud with President Paul von Hindenburg also kept Ludendorff in the public eye. Germans found his opposition to Hindenburg either incomprehensible or disgraceful and interpreted his attacks on the president as a betrayal of their wartime partnership. Ludendorff believed his feud with Hindenburg justified, but Hindenburg was the innocent party in the dispute. After his election to the presidency in 1925, Hindenburg stopped paying his annual visit to the Ludendorffs, reasonably arguing that it would be politically irresponsible, as president, to associate with such a harsh critic of the Weimar Republic. The decision infuriated Ludendorff's sense of honor, and the well-publicized conflict seriously harmed the military's as well as the public's opinion of Hindenburg's former colleague. One newspaper in Chemnitz, the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, which represented the views of Germany's industrial magnates, opined that Ludendorff, in commenting on the 1925 Treaty of Locarno, wrote ugly words in the *Völkischer Beobachter* when he lamented that "with his name standing under this

document of disgrace and dishonor, my German heart cramps up when I see how the Field Marshal sacrificed his glory.”⁴⁴

General Hermann von François’s speaking tour in the spring of 1926 gave the press another opportunity to chastise Ludendorff. François, whose insubordination contributed to the German army’s decisive victory over invading Russian forces at the Battle of Tannenberg, had recently published his memoirs of the battle. They quickly became the subject of political controversy since in them he claimed that he, not Ludendorff, bore responsibility for the great victory. In fact, he insisted that Ludendorff, with a combination of indecisiveness and contradictory orders, nearly cost Germany the battle. On April 24, 1926, at one of François’s lectures in Berlin, a crowd of six hundred Ludendorff supporters from a local *völkisch* officers’ association and the Wilmersdorf *Ortsgruppe* (local group) of the German People’s Party (*Deutsche Volkspartei*, or DVP) caused a serious disturbance when François failed to mention Ludendorff in his speech. The agitators, with cries of “falsifier of history!” “actor!” and “theater-general!” hooted him down and stormed from the hall with rowdy shouts of “Heil Ludendorff!”⁴⁵ Such stories made wonderful copy. The ensuing press coverage of the controversy further harmed Ludendorff’s reputation, for at the end of May the *Volkswille*, a Socialist newspaper in Upper Silesia and a persistent critic of Ludendorff, claimed that the German

⁴⁴ *Allgemeine Zeitung (Chemnitz)*, December 1, 1925. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁴⁵ *Meissner Tageblatt*, April 24, 1926. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

people no longer saw Ludendorff in Tannenberg. The German people, it argued, no longer associated him with the great victory.⁴⁶

The press also ridiculed Ludendorff's associates in the radical nationalist movement. On January 23, 1926, the national liberal Berlin newspaper *National-Zeitung*, referring to the alias and disguise he used in his flight to Sweden at the end of World War I, poked fun at the general and his followers in an article titled "Ludendorff again on the *Putschwagon* - Herr Lindström sees everything through tinted glasses." The article reported that Ludendorff, in front of a meeting of the German-*Völkisch* Officers' Association, "a miniature organization of *völkisch* German officers, a good part of whom were neither officers nor ever at the Front," mercilessly derided Ludendorff and his allies.⁴⁷ It also claimed that he openly supported a return of the Hohenzollerns, an allegation he quickly denied. His quick denial was plausible; in the early 1920s, he had advocated a restoration of the monarchy with little more than symbolic power, but by 1925, he had abandoned the idea.

While the German press recognized the Tannenbergers' zealous defense of Ludendorff's reputation and his turbulent relationship with his former military colleagues, it also mocked his political machinations. In the October 1926 state elections in Saxony and Thuringia, Ludendorff declared that he wanted nothing to do with German politics and political parties since Freemasonry, capitalism, Judaism, and Catholicism unduly influenced two nationalist parties, the German National People's Party (*Deutschnationale*

⁴⁶ *Volkswille*, May 23, 1926. BA, Zsg 103/8602 (Ludendorff, Erich).

⁴⁷ *National-Zeitung*, January 23, 1926. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

Volkspartei, or DNVP) and the DVP. The *Volkszeitung für Meissen* replied: “The best thing for you to do, dear Erich, is to slip away immediately to Valhalla and become Wotan’s sergeant.”⁴⁸ The *Volkswille* in Silesia noticed the irony in Ludendorff’s statement concerning the DNVP and the DVP; the two parties he claimed were festering with Jews and Freemasons were the two parties that supported him the most.⁴⁹

Radical German nationalists in the Tannenbergbund, the NSDAP, and elsewhere found the mainstream German press’s irreverent treatment of Ludendorff aggravating and scandalous, but they gradually came to understand that the German public had ceased to take Ludendorff seriously. Indeed, as early as his birthday on April 9, 1926 a few radical German nationalists confessed that the general had lost much of the respect they believed Germans owed him. *Der Jungdeutsche*, the newspaper of the Young German Order (*Jungdeutsche Orden*, or Jungdo) commented that as Ludendorff ended his sixtieth year, a broad swath of the German public would ignore his birthday and he would receive few congratulations from nationalist circles. The commentary concluded: “It is not easy to find a place for the life’s work of a great man as long as he still stands in the middle of the struggles and convulsions of the dramatic, turbulent present.”⁵⁰ Similarly, the National Socialist *Mitteldeutscher Beobachter* wrote that except for Hitler, nobody is hated more than Ludendorff, but added that only an alliance between Hitler and

⁴⁸ *Volkszeitung für Meissen*, October 19, 1926. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁴⁹ *Volkswille*, October 21, 1926. BA, Zsg 103/8602 (Ludendorff, Erich).

⁵⁰ *Der Jungdeutsche*, April 9, 1926. BA, Zsg 103/8602 (Ludendorff, Erich).

Ludendorff together would bring the German people freedom,⁵¹ suggesting that radical nationalists were willing to forgive Ludendorff's faults if only he were willing to join Hitler.

Parallel movements

Hitler greatly admired Ludendorff. Under proper supervision, the general's support would have increased the visibility of the NSDAP, and, more importantly, unified the disparate elements of radical German nationalism. Despite his political weaknesses, Ludendorff remained a powerful symbol around which radical German nationalists could rally.

It would be difficult, however, for the Nazis to supervise Ludendorff, for he and his most fanatic supporters rejected Hitler's claim to sole authority over the radical German nationalist movement. From its inception, the Tannenbergbund was a radical German nationalist reaction against Hitler's authoritarian leadership. Ludendorff's supporters, and many within the Nazi party itself, would have preferred the radical nationalist movement to be a loosely assembled confederation of various organizations, not a unitary political party under the absolute authority of a single Führer. In such a confederation, Ludendorff's leadership would balance Hitler's. Both men would serve as equal partners, with Hitler the "drummer" rallying the masses while Ludendorff the *Feldherr* (warlord) inspired them.

⁵¹ *Mitteldeutscher Beobachter*, April 9, 1926. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

A union of the Tannenbergbund and the NSDAP was unlikely, although Nazis and Tannenbergbund members tried hard to combine the two organizations. Historical precedent existed; Ludendorff had been a close ally of the NSDAP in the past. In the months immediately before the 1923 Hitler Putsch, the early NSDAP benefited greatly from his connections as well as his agitation, since the former helped advance the party and the latter encouraged nationalist unrest. Without his high profile as a Nazi sympathizer during the first years of the Nazi movement, the NSDAP would have been unable to reach a broad national audience and would not have enjoyed the occasional patronage of elite elements in the German military and German society. Ludendorff, transferring donations from patrons to party, had served as an invaluable intermediary between the NSDAP, shadowy aristocrats, and politically active industrialists such as Fritz Thyssen.⁵² Hitler and Ludendorff also stood together before the Munich People's Court in early 1924 for their involvement in the Hitler Putsch the previous November. Immediately after his acquittal he became a Reichstag delegate for the Nazi-sponsored National Socialist Freedom Party (*Nationalsozialistische Freiheitspartei*, or NSFP), elected in May 1924 with such prominent Nazis as Röhm, Gottfried Feder, and Wilhelm Frick, and other radical nationalist leaders such as Graefe, Reventlow, and Reinhold Wulle.⁵³ He lacked enthusiasm as a delegate and rarely attended legislative sessions.

⁵² Ian Kershaw, *Hitler. 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 189-90.

⁵³ Piazza, "Ludendorff," 132; Max Schwarz, *Biographisches Handbuch der Reichstage* (Hanover: Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschehen, 1965), 548-54.

It is unclear why Ludendorff remained until 1927 a NSFP representative allied with the NSDAP, for he rarely participated in the Reichstag, but evidence suggests that he took advantage of the immunity from prosecution offered to Reichstag delegates. This immunity served Ludendorff well. In the summer of 1925, after the police found weapons in the home of a Bavarian Frontbann member, the chief prosecutor in Leipzig for the State Court for the Defense of the Republic (*Oberreichsanwalt beim Staatsgerichtshof zum Schutze der Republik*) investigated Ludendorff's association with Röhm's organization, which camouflaged the outlawed SA. In August, however, the chief prosecutor dropped all charges against Ludendorff and ten of his colleagues, one of whom was Wilhelm Brückner, Hitler's future adjutant.⁵⁴

This case, as well as Ludendorff's Reichstag career, demonstrates that the world of radical German nationalism was small. All major, and many minor, radical German nationalist figures had worked together at one time or another. Their paths frequently crossed, making it difficult for Hitler and Ludendorff to maintain the distinctiveness of their organizations. Ludendorff himself left the door open for his possible return to National Socialism. In September 1925, he wrote Heß that the anti-Hitler faction in the *völkisch* movement had complained about Ludendorff's ties with the NSDAP. This faction had criticized Ludendorff for not defying the party, but he assured Heß that he refused to become involved in a battle with the Nazis. He only requested that the numerous elements of the *völkisch* movement enjoy freedom to act independently.⁵⁵ He

⁵⁴ *Pfälzer Volksbote*, October 14, 1925. BA, Zsg. 103/8601 (Ludendorff, Erich).

⁵⁵ Erich Ludendorff to Rudolf Heß, September 6, 1925. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

asked Heß to promise him that his movement would not become subordinate to Hitler and the NSDAP if, at some future date, the Tannenbergbund and the NSDAP merged to form a unified *völkisch* political block. Ludendorff also corresponded with Joseph Goebbels, who had a high opinion of Ludendorff's "extensive knowledge about everything,"⁵⁶ and spoke with him whenever they met at nationalist rallies. In May 1926, he issued a statement declaring that rumors of his break with the Nazi leader were false, and that his relationship with Hitler remained good.

No break had occurred between Ludendorff and the NSDAP leadership; until 1927, Ludendorff and the party maintained a dialogue. At the beginning of that year, he spoke a few words at a German-*Völkisch* Officers' Association meeting attended by Strasser and Graefe, leader of the DVFP who, with Ludendorff, had formed the association. There were also rumors that Hitler would give a short speech at the gathering.⁵⁷ The rumors proved unfounded, but they demonstrated that radical nationalists believed it possible that Ludendorff and Hitler would eventually share the political stage.

This possibility worried Hitler. In February 1927, he issued to all NSDAP *Gauleitungen* (district administrations) and *Ortsgruppen* a standing order strictly prohibiting membership in and cooperation with the Tannenbergbund and its affiliated organizations. However, Hitler also decreed that under no circumstances were party

⁵⁶ Diary entry for November 28, 1925. Joseph Goebbels, *Das Tagebuch von Joseph Goebbels 1925/26*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1961), 44.

⁵⁷ *Münchner Post*, January 15, 1927. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

members to initiate conflict with Ludendorff.⁵⁸ This order was consistent with two previous orders, issued in May and December 1925, which cut the bonds between the NSDAP and the paramilitary organizations.⁵⁹ Hitler sought to separate the Tannenbergbund and Nazi memberships in order to isolate the NSDAP from other radical nationalist movements, thereby entrenching his own power within the Nazi party,⁶⁰ but he did not want friction between the two organizations to ruin his party's cohesion. Hitler's need in February 1927 to remind party members of orders prohibiting association with the Tannenbergbund demonstrates that a significant number of Nazis found it difficult to abandon Ludendorff. It also demonstrates that his control over the NSDAP was not yet absolute.

Most Nazis, weakening Hitler's attempt to isolate the NSDAP, interpreted Hitler's order as permission to praise and defend Ludendorff. That April, in honor of his birthday, the party itself tried to defend Ludendorff by printing an opinion in the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* stating: "It is not his fault that his people fail to follow his way to morality and willpower. Many of the greatest must endure the bitter experience of loneliness at the pinnacle of mankind." The editors hoped to "invigorate him on his historical mission."⁶¹ These were not words of derision and hatred. In

⁵⁸ Circular to all NSDAP *Gauleitungen* and independent *Ortsgruppen*, February 5, 1927. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1246, roll 53 (Verschiedenes).

⁵⁹ Dietrich Orlow, *The History of the Nazi Party: 1919-1945*, vol. 1 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1969), 62, 68.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶¹ *Völkischer Beobachter*, April 8, 1927. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

October 1927, complaining of the way the newspaper *Frederikus* criticized Ludendorff's character, NSDAP *Ortsleiter* Siegfried Kasche of Sorau in Niederlausitz, Prussia, signed "Heil Hitler, Heil Ludendorff" to a letter with an NSDAP letterhead, and sent it to the publisher.⁶² Kasche also requested one hundred anti-Masonic pamphlets from the *Deutsche Wochenschau*, Ludendorff's main forum and the organ of the German-*Völkisch* Officers Association.⁶³

Kasche was a former *völkisch* politician and propagandist in Berlin. He eventually became a deputy *Gauleiter*, the Nazi Reichstag delegate for the Frankfurt an der Oder electoral district, and a diplomat in the Third Reich. As early as January 1926, when a member of the National Socialist Freedom Movement (*Nationalsozialistische Freiheitsbewegung*, or NSFB), he had asked Ludendorff's ally Georg Ahlemann for information concerning the Tannenbergbund and, in violation of Hitler's previous orders prohibiting contact with the Ludendorff's organization, inquired how his *Ortsgruppe* could combine with the Tannenbergbund. If unable to combine his *Ortsgruppe* with Ludendorff's organization, Kasche wanted to know how to form his own *Ortsgruppe* of the Tannenbergbund.⁶⁴ Hitler surely sought to prevent such machinations when he restated his order prohibiting Nazis from fraternizing with other radical nationalist organizations.

⁶² Siegfried Kasche to F. S. Holz, October 23, 1927. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 199, roll 9 (Gau, Kreise, Ortsgruppen).

⁶³ Kasche to the *Deutsche Wochenschau*, October 23, 1927. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 199, roll 9 (Gau, Kreise, Ortsgruppen).

⁶⁴ Kasche to Georg Ahlemann, January 11, 1926. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 199, roll 9 (Gau, Kreise, Ortsgruppen).

Ahlemann had power in the Ludendorff movement; he was a retired lieutenant colonel, Tannenbergbund *Landesführer* of Greater Berlin and Brandenburg, and publisher of the *Deutsche Wochenschau*. He was also a former member of the Prussian parliament and, like Ludendorff, was elected to the Reichstag in May 1924 as a delegate from the NSFP.⁶⁵ He occasionally spoke with Goebbels, who concluded, “he’s no longer learning, despite his extraordinary effort.”⁶⁶ Kasche expected his communication with Ahlemann to bridge the gap between Hitler and Ludendorff, for he invited Ahlemann to give a lecture to an open NSDAP meeting in his town, and later told Ludendorff “your struggle is our struggle.” The desired results never materialized, but he actively disseminated, in his capacity as *Ortsleiter*, the *Deutsche Wochenschau* throughout his region.⁶⁷

Schism and isolation

If the Nazis wished to be taken seriously as a national party, Hitler’s decision to isolate the NSDAP from the other elements of the radical nationalist movement was correct. Goebbels was among the first to realize that in the future Ludendorff would become a liability for the Nazi party, writing in May 1926 that “Ludendorff - Hitler” was an “awkward question,” and that “there will be a break someday.”⁶⁸ Although Ludendorff still possessed the power to inspire radical German nationalists, his inelegant

⁶⁵ Schwarz, *Handbuch der Reichstage*, 548.

⁶⁶ Diary entry for November 8, 1925. *Tagebuch 1925/26*, 40.

⁶⁷ Kasche to Erich Ludendorff, October 23, 1927. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 199, roll 9 (Gau, Kreise, Ortsgruppen).

⁶⁸ Diary entry for May 13 [14], 1926. *Tagebuch 1925/26*, 79.

agitation undermined radical nationalism's viability as a national political force; it was clear that the public's popular perception of Ludendorff was unflattering. On his birthday in 1927, the *Deutsche Tageblatt* bemoaned the general's behavior, since, it remarked, he was still considered a war hero. The newspaper wrote:

It is a sign of the times that on his upcoming birthday we Germans, who want to remember with reverential gratitude the great victor in war and our leader in the struggle for *völkisch* freedom, can only find isolated magazines and newspapers able to express what this man means for the German past, what he means for the Fatherland today, and what he will mean for the future. Today, for the well-disposed, his name, ennobled by the hate of all the enemies of Germany, is a rock of scandal and a wellspring of embarrassment.⁶⁹

As Hitler consolidated his authority over the NSDAP, Ludendorff responded to his increasing isolation by strengthened his control over the Tannenbergbund. After 1927 he tried to weaken the independence of the veterans' organizations by cultivating national professional and cultural groups, such as the Tannenberg Student Association (*Tannenberg-Studentenbund*), the Tannenberg Culture League (*Tannenberg-Kulturbund*), the Doctors' Union of the Tannenbergbund (*Ärztervereinigung im Tannenbergbund*), the Teachers' Union of the Tannenbergbund (*Lehrervereinigung im Tannenbergbund*), and the German Youth of the Tannenbergbund (*Deutsche Jugend im Tannenbergbund*).⁷⁰ Ludendorff and the Tannenbergbund Bundesleitung (national administration) directly controlled these professional organizations. They had no direct control over the veterans' associations in the Tannenbergbund. The shift in organizational structure exacerbated the political weakness of his movement, increased the visibility of his and his wife's spiritual

⁶⁹ *Deutsche Tageblatt*, April 9, 1927. BA, Zsg 103/8602 (Ludendorff, Erich).

⁷⁰ Borst, "Ludendorff Bewegung," 134-35.

philosophy, and forced the formerly independent veterans' associations out of the Tannenbergbund.

The structural change in the Tannenbergbund marked a turning point for the Ludendorff movement. As the Tannenbergbund became a hierarchical organization dedicated to transforming the German *mentalité*, the Ludendorff Press increased in importance. It became a parallel organization alongside the Tannenbergbund, disseminating propaganda and binding the members of the Tannenbergbund with a common *Weltanschauung*. The Ludendorff Press eventually became the most influential organization in the Ludendorff movement since its agents, through lectures and publications, were responsible for maintaining ideological consistency among the various member organizations of the Tannenbergbund. They also served as an internal surveillance force, notifying Ludendorff of conflicts, improprieties, and irregularities in his movement.

The reorganization of the Tannenbergbund damaged Ludendorff's relations with military men. In the first years of Ludendorff's movement most of the organizational strength of the Tannenbergbund came from reserve and retired officers. His conflict with Hindenburg alienated these officers, who gradually drifted away to other Rightist groups. The reorganized Tannenbergbund reflected the loss of Ludendorff's military supporters; the Tannenbergbund became more oriented toward civilians. Less willing to submit to the hierarchical leadership structure on which Ludendorff insisted, his civilian supporters preferred to discuss and debate Tannenbergbund policies. Ludendorff found this development intolerable. Unwilling to allow anyone to question his authority, he resisted their demands and, as a result, lost many of his followers.

Hans Buchheim claims that Ludendorff designed the Tannenbergbund to be educational and social, not political,⁷¹ but this conclusion needs amending. Ludendorff originally intended his movement to counter the NSDAP on the German Right. Since his original design, in which the various member organizations within the Tannenbergbund retained their independence, was impotent, Ludendorff had to alter his strategy. His later emphasis on spiritual and cultural matters was not his original intent, but was instead the result of the Tannenbergbund's organizational weakness and ineffectiveness as a political machine.

Continuous public ridicule in the press and Ludendorff's anti-Christian tirades also affected his movement. By 1927, his popularity, so high among radical nationalists after his trial for the Hitler Putsch in early 1924, had plummeted across Germany. As the 1920s progressed, more and more Germans outside of the radical nationalist movement came to see Ludendorff and his followers as oddities and objects of derision. For many Germans the Tannenbergbund increasingly appeared to be a religious sect, and their opinion of his movement hampered its effectiveness in German politics.⁷² Some of them had begun to question his sanity. Indeed, rumors about his mental health had circulated after he suffered a nervous breakdown in August 1918. Although he remained important for a portion of the German population, support for the hero of World War I had declined noticeably, even among radical nationalists, who realized that although he remained an

⁷¹ Buchheim, *Gutachten*, 357.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 356-57.

imposing figure, he was, as Goebbels observed, “no statesman.”⁷³ Hitler benefited from the radical nationalists’ change of heart.

⁷³ Diary entry for May 13 [14], 1926. *Tagebuch 1925/26*, 79.

Chapter 2

The Collapse of the Tannenbergbund

I have given the oath of allegiance to three German *Kaisers*, and I will hold them until my last breath; you can be sure of that. Even if I do not agree with His Excellency Ludendorff's remarks, I will not allow someone to dictate instructions to me, and I must say that the great majority in our 39th Regiment Association has the same opinion. We old 39ers certainly raise our eyes with great reverence to His Excellency, but the attack on our *Reichspräsident* was sickening.¹

-- Hermann Dix to Herbert Frank, April 1930

Ludendorff sees in every bicycle club a new enemy of the people.²

-- Stahlhelm founder Franz Seldte, April 28, 1929

Most studies estimate that at the height of its popularity in 1927, before it began to dissolve, the Tannenbergbund had approximately thirty to forty thousand members.³ To put this number in perspective, the NSDAP counted approximately thirty-five

¹ Hermann Dix to Herbert Frank, April 21, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

² Nachlaß Holtzmann, "Aus Magdeburg wir berichten," April 28, 1929. Quoted in Piazza, "Ludendorff," 132.

³ See Dieter Fricke, Werner Fritsch, Herbert Gottwald, Siegfried Schmidt, and Manfred Weißbecker, eds., *Lexikon zur Parteiengeschichte: Die bürgerlichen und kleinbürgerlichen Parteien und Verbände in Deutschland, (1789-1945)* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut Leipzig, 1986), vol. 4, 180; and Piazza, "Ludendorff," 108.

thousand members in July 1926.⁴ Ludendorff's organization, however, remained weaker than other radical nationalist organizations such as the NSDAP and conservative nationalist groups such as the Stahlhelm for two reasons. First, although Ludendorff became the *Schirmherr*, or patron, of the Tannenbergbund and for all practical purposes led his organization, he never spent much energy managing it, a fault that greatly hampered its effectiveness. Second, he had assembled the Tannenbergbund as a confederation in which member groups had a considerable amount of freedom to pursue their own goals. As radical nationalists defected from the Tannenbergbund and joined the NSDAP, Ludendorff's movement degenerated into a band of anti-Nazi activists.

The Nazis were not responsible for the collapse of the Tannenbergbund. Ludendorff himself destroyed his organization by chasing conspiracies, antagonizing Catholics, and increasing the importance of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* in the Tannenbergbund. He also alienated his core constituency of radical nationalist military men by continuing to denounce Hindenburg and by tightening his grip on the Tannenbergbund, actions which led many member organizations to abandon his federation. His fractured movement degenerated from a loose political confederation of radical nationalist veterans' associations into a much smaller, more fanatical organization steeped in the Ludendorffs' spiritual and *völkisch* ideology.

Contrary to Hitler's effort to keep the Tannenbergbund and the NSDAP distinct, sentimental Nazis sympathetic to Ludendorff continued to argue for a combination of the Tannenbergbund and the NSDAP in an attempt to reunite the two leaders of radical

⁴ Orlow, *History of the Nazi Party*, vol. 1, 76.

German nationalism under a single radical nationalist banner. Defectors from the Tannenbergbund also called for some sort of combination of the two movements. Ludendorff refused to entertain such thoughts. Embarking on a bitter propaganda campaign against the Nazis, he reversed his earlier decision to maintain cordial relations with the NSDAP and broke completely with the Nazis in 1928. Nazism, however, did not abandon Ludendorff. The party's policy toward Ludendorff and the Tannenbergbund remained surprisingly consistent. Despite Ludendorff's angry words, the NSDAP still considered Ludendorff an ally in its revolutionary struggle to transform Germany into a radical nationalist society, even though the party leadership no longer considered his support a political necessity.

Ludendorff against Nazism

Despite the ideological similarities between Ludendorff and the NSDAP, Ludendorff distrusted the NSDAP's reliance on mass politics and feared its revolutionary appeal. He believed that the Nazis, although *völkisch* and anti-Semitic, were naïve, compromising, and unable to recognize the supranational conspiracies arrayed against Germany. In short, the NSDAP was too moderate and it would make critical mistakes in its quest for power. In 1930, when he published *Weltkrieg droht auf deutschem Boden* (translated into English as *The Coming War*), Ludendorff warned that the supranational powers used Hitler and the NSDAP as tools in the future conflict among freemasonry, Catholicism, and communism. Hitler, he believed, would lead Germany to ruin:

I am an opponent of the National Socialist German Workers' Party both at home and abroad, and equally oppose the parties that pursue a socialist policy of fulfillment: or, in other words, which are working on behalf of

the inner Jewish and Masonic circles or of Moscow. The policy of the National Socialist German Workers' Party is framed in the interests of Rome and Moscow and aims, in support of these interests, to enlist the German freedom movement and the millions of Germans who desire to regain by force the right to rearm. Their indignation at the *Diktat* of Versailles, the consequences of the policy of fulfillment, the domination of cosmopolitan capitalism, corruption, etc., are being exploited in order to reach this goal. This policy will merely put us under the heel of Rome instead of the Jews and Freemasons, and our last state will be worse than the first.⁵

He did not base his opposition to Nazism on the substance of the NSDAP's ideological program, political tactics, or wanton thuggery, but on the belief that supranational conspiracies employed the NSDAP to further their own diabolical ends. He feared that the Nazis, either wittingly or not, would deliver Germany to the hands of its greatest enemies.

The NSDAP's refusal to attack Catholicism disturbed Ludendorff. This lack of belligerence was, in Ludendorff's opinion, a fatal error, and he came to believe that the pope conspired with Nazi leaders in order to halt their denunciations of political Catholicism. He warned, "The Roman pope has two trumps in his hand in his game for global domination over the Germans and other peoples. . . . The two trumps are the Center Party (*Zentrum*), including the Bavarian People's Party, and the NSDAP. Both stand equally in spiritual dependence and with identical ties in bondage to their 'holy' father, the Roman pope."⁶ In upholding the interests of political Catholicism, or at least refusing to address religious questions, the NSDAP was, in his opinion, no different from

⁵ Erich Ludendorff, *The Coming War*, n. trans. (London: Faber and Faber, 1931), 173. I have improved the translation.

⁶ Erich Ludendorff, *Hitlers Verrat der Deutschen an den römischen Papst* (Munich: Ludendorffs Volkswarte-Verlag, 1931), 3.

the Catholic Center Party; both, he believed, consciously planned to make Germany a Catholic nation.⁷

Ludendorff concluded in *Weltkrieg droht auf deutschem Boden* that the NSDAP would lead Germany to disaster if it ever gained power because it did not understand the true nature of capitalism, modern war, and international relations. He feared that Hitler, the dupe of supranational conspiracies, only promised Germany enslavement and eventual destruction. Hitler was, in his opinion, not radical enough. Aside from his distrust of Hitler's demagoguery, this fear was his main justification for opposing Nazism. Only a man with military experience, loyal armed forces, and a unified population behind him had the right to lead the German nation and defend the German *Volk*. Ludendorff believed that he, and nobody else, was the only person qualified to lead Germany.

First calls for reconciliation

Occasionally the NSDAP defended itself from Ludendorff's attacks, but its replies tended to be half-hearted. In the beginning of 1928 it described the atmosphere of a Ludendorff lecture as "abnormal carnival nonsense" (*krankhaften Faschingszaubers*),⁸ yet only days earlier it had printed advertisements for Ludendorff events.⁹ The editors of

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ *Völkischer Beobachter*, January 25, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁹ *Völkischer Beobachter*, January 20, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

Der Angriff, the newspaper controlled by Goebbels, the Nazi *Gauleiter* of Berlin, wrote that the Nazis recognized Ludendorff as one of the greatest men of all time since he trained “the brown-shirted guards,” a reference to the SA. Germany, according to the editors, had only two great men: Ludendorff and Hitler, the soldier and the creator of German unity.¹⁰ These were hardly words of condemnation, although it is important to note that the editors clearly demonstrated that Hitler was the superior of the two.

Hitler himself made some conciliatory gestures as well. In August 1929, he published a statement in Ludendorff’s newspaper, *Ludendorffs Volkswarte*, admitting that he and his party opposed both Ludendorff’s *Weltanschauung* and program, and that personal differences existed between the two leaders of the radical nationalist movement. It is unclear why Hitler decided to publish his statement in the *Volkswarte*. It is also unclear why Ludendorff chose to publish Hitler’s statement. Perhaps Hitler sought to make a direct appeal to Ludendorff’s supporters and Ludendorff sought to distinguish the NSDAP from the Tannenbergbund. Outside commentators noticed that Ludendorff’s newspaper was a strange forum in which to make such an admission. The Catholic *Bayerischer Kurier* admitted that tense relations existed between Ludendorff and Hitler but also pointed out the affinity between their respective publications.¹¹ Indeed, the content of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, although less inflammatory, differed little from that of Ludendorff’s publications, and it even advertised Ludendorff lectures and pamphlets.

¹⁰ *Der Angriff*, December 12, 1927. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

¹¹ *Bayerischer Kurier*, August 20, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

Some members of the NSDAP and Tannenbergbund, hoping for reconciliation, tried to downplay the differences between the leaders of the two organizations. Karl von Unruh, who was associated with the Ludendorff Press, assured a radical nationalist in Hamburg that “no conflict exists between Ludendorff and Hitler that requires reconciliation.”¹² The recipient replied: “Why can’t the two march together on one path? If the goal is to be reached, in the interest of both and of the beloved Fatherland, a common path must be found.”¹³ In April 1930, a state counsel (*Justizrat*) in Munich, W. von Zezschwitz, mentioned in a letter that although he had to sever all ties to Ludendorff once he joined the NSDAP, he had done all that he could to reconcile his dual loyalty to both Ludendorff and Hitler. He also argued for reconciliation between Ludendorff and President Hindenburg, although his reasons were neither altruistic nor pragmatic; Ludendorff, in Zezschwitz’s opinion, remained the only person who could protect President Hindenburg from the schemes of the SPD and the Catholic Center Party, which the Jews and Jesuits respectively controlled.¹⁴

Catholic backlash

Ludendorff’s harsh anti-Catholic rhetoric proved to be the greatest barrier to reconciliation with the NSDAP. Hitler understood that Catholics formed a powerful

¹² Karl von Unruh to W. Paulsen, June 24, 1930. IfZ, MA-744 (HdN), no. 1246 Personalsachen (Ludendorff, Erich).

¹³ Paulsen, June 26, 1930. IfZ, MA-744 (HdN), no. 1246 Personalsachen (Ludendorff, Erich).

¹⁴ *Justizrat* W. von Zezschwitz to Frau N. N., April 30, 1930. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1246, roll 53 (Verschiedenes).

political bloc in southern and western Germany and refused to attack Christianity, claiming that:

[The NSDAP] decisively rejects any position on questions that either lie outside the frame of its political work or, being not of basic importance, are irrelevant for it. Its task is not a religious reformation, but a political reorganization of our people. In both religious denominations, it sees equally valuable pillars for the existence of our people and therefore combats those parties that want to degrade this foundation of an ethical, moral, and religious consolidation of our national body to the level or an instrument of their party interests.¹⁵

This statement did not mean that Hitler disagreed with Ludendorff on the role churches played in German politics; he later affirmed that he agreed entirely with Ludendorff's position, but that he needed, "for the building up of a great political movement, the Catholics of Bavaria just as much as the Protestants of Prussia." He added, "The rest can come later."¹⁶ Referring to Ludendorff's anti-Catholic agitation, Hitler complained in *Mein Kampf* that anti-Christians had divided the *völkisch* movement and, referring to Bismarck's failed *Kulturkampf*, argued that it was folly to assume that they could do "what even a Bismarck could not do."¹⁷ Indeed, he ostracized Arthur Dinter, the *Gauleiter* of Thuringia, when Dinter tried to propagate an anti-Christian "German People's Church," and he rejected Rosenberg's anti-Christian *Myth of the Twentieth Century*.¹⁸ Although he hinted to Hermann Rauschning that he tolerated the anti-

¹⁵ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 345-46.

¹⁶ Buchheim, *Gutachten*, 384. Quoted in Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, 4-5.

¹⁷ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 564.

¹⁸ Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, 13.

Christians because they destabilized society and that social unrest was creative,¹⁹ Hitler's prudence and practicality helped maintain the stability and political viability of the NSDAP.

Catholics could tolerate Hitler's silence on religious matters, but they could not tolerate Ludendorff's prejudice. Staging protests and storming Tannenbergbund-sponsored lectures in southern and western Germany, by the end of the 1920s they had begun to fight back. On November 25, 1929, members of a Catholic youth group (*Jungmannschaft*), angry at Ludendorff's propaganda, disrupted a gathering of the Tannenbergbund.²⁰ The *Augsburger Post-Zeitung* also published a letter stating that Ludendorff was in Bavaria because no other German state wanted him. He was, in the author's opinion, a refugee who had found sanctuary in Bavaria and abused Bavarian hospitality even though Bavarians had generously afforded him protection. The author also applauded the actions Catholic Bavarian youths had taken against the Tannenbergbund.²¹

Catholic youths elsewhere in Germany imitated the Bavarian Catholic reaction to Ludendorff's movement. Ludendorff's position in Heidelberg was so weak at the beginning of December 1929 that the local Tannenbergbund organization, facing attacks

¹⁹ Hermann Rauschning, *The Voice of Destruction*, 51. Quoted in Helmreich, *German Churches under Hitler*, 486n. Henry A. Turner and other scholars have questioned the reliability and trustworthiness of Rauschning.

²⁰ *Augsburger Post-Zeitung*, December 6, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

²¹ *Augsburger Post-Zeitung*, November 28, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

by young Catholic men, tried to distance itself from its previous anti-Catholic rhetoric,²² a reversal indicating that Ludendorff had lost control over some segments of his organization. On December 10, 1929, Dr. Heinrich Held, the Bavarian Prime Minister and a leading figure in the BVP, prohibited Tannenbergbund meetings in order to quell the disturbances in his state. At the same time he tried to control Nazi agitation, for their strength had increased in recent provincial elections. His regulations were trivial and had little effect on the NSDAP.²³ Indeed, many years later Hitler claimed to have discussed Ludendorff's anti-Catholicism with Held in 1925. Held had asked him if he wished to associate the NSDAP with Ludendorff, since Held was concerned about Ludendorff's attacks on the Catholic Church. Hitler replied that Ludendorff's affairs were of no concern to him, and that he had no desire to initiate a struggle with Catholicism.²⁴ Regardless of the accuracy of Hitler's admission, his statement describes Held's distrust of Ludendorff's agitation and his general tolerance for Nazi activity.

Ludendorff retaliated against Held's constraints on the Tannenbergbund by railing against the prime minister in his newspaper *Ludendorffs Volkswarte*, orchestrating a letter-writing campaign, and overwhelming Held with telegrams written by Ludendorff supporters. According to the *Bayerischer Kurier* as well as the *Augsburger Post-Zeitung*, the telegrams, which Ludendorff claimed were sent spontaneously by the member organizations of the Tannenbergbund, must have been premeditated since they originated

²² *Augsburger Post-Zeitung*, December 8, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorff).

²³ Large, *Where Ghosts Walked*, 221.

²⁴ *Hitler's Secret Conversations*, 234.

in one location and arrived together.²⁵ Ludendorff's smear campaign only served to antagonize Catholics. It also generated negative publicity for his movement.

Ludendorff continued to publish heated propaganda against the Church in the face of considerable public disapproval, press criticism, and state intervention. His sustained attacks on Catholicism worried Bavarian officials so much that in August 1931 the Munich police, citing the March 28, 1931 presidential decree to prevent political riots, prohibited the publication of *Ludendorffs Volkswarte* after it printed a particularly vicious article against the Church.²⁶ Yet for all the worry about unrest in Bavaria, the Munich police closed the newspaper for only two weeks, and allowed Ludendorff, under police supervision, to continue publishing his diatribes against the Catholic Church. The Bavarian government demonstrated concern about Ludendorff's agitation only when it threatened to disturb public order; it never completely halted his activities.

Chasing conspiracies

Although Ludendorff's outlandish anti-Catholicism caused less damage to his movement in Protestant northern Germany than in the Catholic south, it nonetheless increased the visibility and acceptability of the NSDAP, which, compared to the Tannenbergbund, appeared to radical nationalists across Germany as a rational, pragmatic, and sane alternative to Ludendorff's movement. He became embroiled in

²⁵ *Augsburger Post-Zeitung*, December 24, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

²⁶ Order Nr. 6c 399/31 from the Bavarian local police, August 4, 1931. Quoted in the Tannenbergbund newsletter, August 1931. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 864, roll 42 (Andere Parteien und Verbände).

numerous lawsuits initiated by angry victims of his diatribes and was often represented by Walter Luetgebrune, a prominent right-wing attorney who made his reputation defending in court members of the SA.²⁷

In a well-publicized incident in July 1928, Ludendorff embarrassed himself when he insisted that the B'nai-Brith and a Masonic lodge in Marienbad had plotted to assassinate him and his wife. The following November he also insisted that a Bamberg Masonic lodge had issued a death threat against him. The accusations sparked a small press battle between the *Deutsche Wochenschau* and the *Völkischer Beobachter*. The Nazi press questioned the accuracy of Ludendorff's claims and insisted that Ludendorff's newspaper, the *Deutsche Wochenschau*, must be held accountable for its accusations. The party organ, however, qualified its statement by claiming that the Jewish press, with its constant mockery of Ludendorff, was to blame for Ludendorff's "crazed" anger.²⁸ This qualification was a thinly veiled attempt to criticize Ludendorff without harming his reputation among radical nationalists. Ludendorff responded by attacking the Nazi press, claiming that the *Völkischer Beobachter* had formed an alliance with the one of Germany's leading liberal newspapers, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, which was, in his opinion, the ultimate symbol of Jewish domination of the German media.²⁹

²⁷ Bruce Campbell, *The SA Generals and the Rise of Nazism* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 113.

²⁸ *Völkischer Beobachter*, July 15, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

²⁹ *Deutsche Wochenschau*, August 12, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

Nevertheless, the Nazi press continued to defend Ludendorff. It welcomed Ludendorff's revelation that Freemasons surrounded Germany with enemies even though the Masonic lodges, according to the Nazi press, were in the midst of a difficult struggle to rehabilitate themselves and regain their former popularity in Germany. The NSDAP itself occasionally attacked Freemasonry; during the Third Reich, the party sometimes accused officials of belonging to a lodge when it charged them with corruption.³⁰ The *Völkischer Beobachter* also continued to advertise Ludendorff's exposé of Masonic secrets, his book *Vernichtung der Freimaurerei durch Enthüllung ihrer Geheimnisse* (*Destroying Freemasonry by Exposing its Secrets*).³¹

The Masons quickly replied to Ludendorff's accusations in order to prove their loyalty to the country, for German Masons took his ludicrous assault on Freemasonry seriously. The Bamberg lodge denied that it ever threatened him, arguing that it "has had nothing to do with Ludendorff in the past, has nothing to do with him now, and will have nothing to do with him in the future."³² In the next year, German lodges published a number of answers to Ludendorff's exposé. One stated flatly that there was no global organization of Freemasons since each country's lodges remained independent of each

³⁰ Bimonthly report for June/July 1934. *Deutschland-Bericht der Sopade, Erster Jahrgang 1934* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Petra Nettelbeck, 1980), 235

³¹ *Völkischer Beobachter*, October 23, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

³² *Frankfurter Zeitung*, November 1, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

other.³³ Others demonstrated greater deference to Ludendorff, praising his leadership and heroism during World War I and blaming naïve readers for believing his mistaken claims.³⁴ A few, however, refused to yield to Ludendorff. In November 1929, Graf Dohna, the former *Grossmeister* (Grand Master) of the largest Masonic lodge in Germany before World War I, sued Ludendorff for libel after Ludendorff accused the former Grand Master of deliberately starting World War I by plotting the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Ludendorff also met public ridicule in October 1928 when word leaked out that Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government in Nanjing had invited him to reorganize the Chinese Army. Throughout the month, he faced considerable derision in the press. One Catholic Center Party newspaper in Upper Silesia concluded, with a touch of irony, that Chiang's offer was a great opportunity for Ludendorff to become the leader of the "Yellow Horde."³⁵ Another Catholic Centrist newspaper, tongue in cheek, observed that Germany, out of its love for the Chinese people, wanted them to take him, but reminded Ludendorff not to forget his pension from the German government.³⁶ Ludendorff ultimately rejected Chiang's invitation, the news of which produced heavy-handed

³³ Wilhelm Fluhrer, *Wer ist vernichtet? Die Freimaurerei oder Ludendorff?* (Wiesbaden: Verlag Hofbuchhandlung Heinrich Staadt, 1927), 12.

³⁴ Carl Bonhoff, *Droht der deutschen Freimaurerei Vernichtung? Eine Antwort an Erich Ludendorff* (Leipzig: Verein Deutscher Freimaurer, 1927), 3, 8.

³⁵ *Volksstimme*, October 17, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

³⁶ *Landauer Volksblatt*, October 18, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

sarcasm: one Nuremberg newspaper commented that it was a shame Ludendorff had decided to remain on the *völkisch* front in Germany, since by doing so he had quieted the laughter so “indispensable to national health.”³⁷

Another strange episode occurred in January 1929. Four years previously, an Austrian swindler named Tausand sought investors in Munich for his scheme to manufacture gold. He managed to defraud a number of people, including, it was rumored, Ludendorff, although nobody was able to prove the allegation. It is possible that Tausand, in order to cheat wealthy industrialists, used Ludendorff’s name without the general’s knowledge.³⁸ The Munich press, as reported by the National Liberal *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, a paper sympathetic to Hitler, understood that Ludendorff was interested in Tausand’s discovery because the alchemist promised he would set aside a portion of his scheme’s profits for nationalist purposes.³⁹ Regardless of the truth of the accusation, his determination to unmask supranational conspiracies did him irreparable harm not only among the general German public but also among radical German nationalists.

³⁷ *Fränkische Tagespost*, October 28, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

³⁸ *Hitler’s Secret Conversations*, 485.

³⁹ *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, January 21, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

***Überstaatliche Mächte* and the loss of national identity**

For the Ludendorffs, a spider's web of fiendish conspiracy and counter-conspiracy enmeshed Germany. Shadowy figures and sinister cabals, which they called the *überstaatliche Mächte* (supranational powers), responsible for governing the world populated the Ludendorffs' universe. Capitalists, Communists, Catholics, Freemasons, and Jews freely mixed and mingled, at once competing against each other and joining for mutual benefit, always determined to crush individual nations and create an international community under their domination. The Ludendorffs had a simple *Weltanschauung* that blamed Germany's troubles, as well as Ludendorff's military failures and subsequent political ineffectiveness, on foreigners and a few traitorous Germans.

His emphasis on conspiracy to explain Germany's troubles after World War I pointed to a wider crisis of confidence in the country. There is great temptation for societies to blame conspiracies for the mysteries, scandals, humiliations, and difficulties they face, especially if these societies encounter extraordinarily severe political, social, and economic problems. In the 1920s and 1930s, Germany experienced such difficulties. Religious, political, economic, and scientific explanations were inadequate reassurances for Germans in the unstable years during the 1920s and 1930s. The crisis in confidence opened the door for the bizarre *Weltanschauungen* of the Ludendorffs and others like them, such as Streicher, Rosenberg, and Heinrich Himmler. For radical German nationalists these contrived explanations based on the notion of faceless conspiracies made sense; for them the history of Germany in the interwar years seemed inhumane, confusing, and arbitrary. Intangible economic developments had destroyed the German economy, social forces unleashed by World War I had destabilized German society, and a

new democratic government of questionable legitimacy had transformed the German state. Once familiar terrain was now barely recognizable. Conspiracy theory instilled order, offered explanation, and put a human face on otherwise confusing, random, unrelated, and impersonal events. Ludendorff was merely one of many conspiracy theorists in Germany during the interwar years, and although some Germans chuckled at his strange and groundless fantasies, he helped fuel the fire of conspiracy theory with his widespread publications and the subsequent public discussions of his off-the-wall hypotheses. Radical German nationalists, regardless of their political allegiance, agreed with the spirit, if not the details, of his accusations. More importantly, Germans became familiar with his tirades and rants.

It is astonishing that Germany, a highly educated country, accepted the paranoid fantasies of extremists, be they Leftists who railed against industrialists or Rightists who fumed against international communism. Yet, as Hannah Arendt suggested, conspiracy theory attracted the *déclassé* of an atomized society. From bankrupt shopkeepers to struggling farmers, humiliated veterans to frustrated civil servants, unemployed workers to simple cranks, Germany was awash in conspiracy theorists during the interwar years. The Ludendorffs contributed their share to the flood of conspiracy theories, thereby helping to lay the foundation for the Third Reich. Arendt proposed that conspiracy and mystery prove essential for the creation of totalitarian movements since such movements, in their drive to power, harness the populace's suspicious and gullible nature. For Arendt, the modern masses, disbelieving facts but trusting their imaginations, long for stability and consistency in their lives. Totalitarian propaganda, which relentlessly exposes and pursues supranational conspiracies, offered them consistency. Yet

totalitarian movements must “conjure up a lying world” in which the masses are comfortable and protected from the inconsistent and incomprehensible reality of modern society. Both the Nazis and the Bolsheviks, according to Arendt, learned that supranational conspiracies made effective propaganda for mass consumption; totalitarian propaganda thrived when it escaped reality and produced fiction. As a result, totalitarian movements, offering security to the “isolated individuals of an atomized society,” rested on a foundation of conspiracy.⁴⁰

The Ludendorffs, fearing internationalism, framed their opposition to international cooperation in racist terms emphasizing supranational conspiracy. Collectivization, which in their judgment was the result of internationalism, diluted the blood and strength of the German people, weakening them and leaving them vulnerable to foreign predators. “Many times,” Ludendorff wrote, “I have proven that the priestly caste robs the people of their physical and spiritual uniqueness, changes humanity into mush through miscegenation and global religion, or through religion transforms society into a bustling, busy, yet spiritually collectivized anthill.”⁴¹ The resulting loss of national identity terrified the Ludendorffs just as it terrified other radical nationalists. To avert this danger, they insisted that the various *Völker* must preserve national freedom and the differences between nations. National identity, according to Ludendorff, trumped all other identities since only a cohesive national identity without the conflicting loyalties of

⁴⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, vol. 3 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1951), 49-61.

⁴¹ Erich Ludendorff, “Auch asiatische Priesterkasten erstreben Kollektivierung von Menschen und Völkern,” in *Asiatenpriestern?* 9.

class interest ensured a productive and prosperous national economy in which all members of the national community benefited. Ludendorff was not alone in these sentiments: quite a few Europeans, especially those on the political Right, believed class conflict and its political expression in Marxism disrupted and destabilized national communities, and they rejected internationalism because it would force their nations to lose economic and political independence.

The collectivizing influence of socialism and Christianity occurred together, according to Ludendorff. Perhaps referring to Catholic social welfare groups, the Catholic Center Party, or even Pope Leo XIII's 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which criticized social injustice and capitalist exploitation of the working class, Ludendorff insisted that the Catholic Church encouraged the growth of socialism, an act that would ultimately lead to the collapse of German society. He pronounced that Bismarck himself recognized Catholicism's conspiratorial aims. "It was always the design of the papacy," Ludendorff wrote, "to push others, i.e., the secular arm, into burning heretics. The German worker, led by Social Democracy, must make revolution, but in fact, as Bismarck first said, it was the Jesuits who were the leaders of Social Democracy."⁴² It is unclear whether Bismarck actually made such a remark. According to Ludendorff, Germany lost the war because of socialism at home, but if one follows his logic, the responsibility for this defeat lay with the Catholics, who initiated sinister plots to humiliate Germany, collectivize German society, instill socialism, and suppress the German *Volk*.

⁴² Ludendorff, *Feldherrnworte*, vol. 3, 59.

Many Europeans also criticized capitalism during the interwar years, although generally not for anti-Catholic or anti-Semitic reasons.⁴³ The 1920s and 1930s were periods of economic instability in Europe, especially in Germany. Ludendorff, however, based his critique of capitalism on conspiracy theory, not on economic or social grounds. He argued, “I have always demonstrated that each struggle for freedom is a contradiction as long as the Germans allow the officials of the Christian Church to confirm them as Christians into the great sheep herd, which then allows itself to be sheared and slaughtered by world capital.”⁴⁴ He also claimed that once Germans eliminated Christianity from the “body of the *Volk*,” Germans would also eliminate priests, Jews, and their capital. As a result, he continued, each Christian and capitalist state would lose its most reliable means of “crippling freedom” and advancing collectivization.⁴⁵ In this respect, Ludendorff is a unique figure on the German Right, since others on that side of the political spectrum rarely referred to Christianity as a bulwark of capitalism.

Germany’s high unemployment rate, he argued, was also the result of international capitalism, but instead of analyzing capitalism as an economic system, as did anti-capitalists on the Left, Ludendorff insisted that unemployment was the result of

⁴³ The number of studies focusing on capitalism’s critics during the interwar years is enormous. For extensive analyses of right-wing, conservative, and fascist critiques of capitalism, see Herman Lebovics, *Social Conservatism and the Middle Classes in Germany, 1914-1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Walter Struve, *Elites against Democracy: Leadership Ideals in Bourgeois Political Thought in Germany, 1890-1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Muller, *The Other God that Failed*, and Schüddekopf, *Linke Leute von Rechts*.

⁴⁴ Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff, “Weg mit Goldwährung und Börse!” in *Judenmacht*, 394.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 395.

the supranational conspiracies' conscious attempts to destroy Germany. He wrote, "Unemployment is the supranational powers' systematic, induced, and desired means to expropriate the people, to break the strength and independence of mankind . . . and to lead it into the collective."⁴⁶ At times, he appears to have supported socialist arguments against capitalism, but he criticized socialists for not acknowledging supranational conspiracies in their analyses of capitalism. "The liberation of German workers," he argued, "is only possible with the liberation of the German economy from the hands of international capitalists and of the German people from not only the straight-jacket of the international Christian churches but also the trusts and trade unions and other business and political structures through which the supranational powers exploit Germans."⁴⁷

His opposition to capitalism also stemmed from the idea of a "socialism of the blood," popular among German front-line veterans of World War I. The irresponsible individualism inherent to capitalism, in his opinion, fostered a divided society. Like other Conservative Revolutionaries, he sought to rework socialism into a unique system particularly suited to Germany.⁴⁸ This attempt was not unique to Ludendorff's movement; conservative and anti-Semitic political parties had tried to do the same thing during the Wilhelmine Empire.⁴⁹ His military stature lent credence to his advocacy of a unified society formed much like a military unit, lacking competition between classes and

⁴⁶ Ludendorff, *Feldherrnworte*, vol. 1, 43.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁸ Woods, *The Conservative Revolution*, 2.

⁴⁹ See Richard S. Levy, *The Downfall of the Anti-Semitic Political Parties in Imperial Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

individuals. Proponents of corporatism and economic autarky, of which the NSDAP, the Italian Fascist Party, and later the Argentine Populist Party are prime examples, advanced similar arguments at the time.

Ludendorff also opposed capitalism for cultural reasons. According to Piazza, he and his wife sought to escape the modern world, shunned material and personal gratification, and rejected purely scientific explanations of the universe. Piazza indicates that as they became more idealistic they sought a higher ethical state of being that would eventually lead the German people into a new era of German history.⁵⁰ Piazza's analysis is largely correct, although Mathilde Ludendorff considered her philosophy scientific. Similar ideas rejecting modernity found popularity on the German Right. Indeed, the Ludendorffs advocated a return to traditional rural German culture since they believed that the demands of modern capitalist society had torn the German people from the soil, causing them to forget their heritage and ensuring their submission to finance and industrial capital. Again, the Ludendorffs' ideology paralleled similar intellectual developments among Conservative Revolutionaries.

Yet the Ludendorffs supported private property since it permitted independence and promoted the preservation of the *Volk*. Expropriation of property, in their opinion, was immoral and violated personal freedom, and they included the charging of interest in their definition of expropriation since usury degraded people and forced them to find menial work in order to survive. Laborers, according to Ludendorff, were nothing more

⁵⁰ Piazza, "Ludendorff," 123-25.

than “weak pack animals in the hands of the capitalists.”⁵¹ Although they believed that capitalism deprived the German people of their freedom as well as their morality, the Ludendorffs refused to surrender the concept of private property.

There were glaring contradictions in the Ludendorffs’ disdain for industrial capitalism. They insisted on elevating rural society and diminishing urban culture even though Erich Ludendorff demanded a powerful industrial base designed to manufacture the modern tools of war, without which Germany could not defend itself from outside aggression. He was unable reconcile this paradox. Another contradiction existed in the Ludendorffs’ support for private property but rejection of the stock market. The Ludendorffs believed that society had no need for stock markets, the ultimate symbols of world capitalism. Closing stock markets and ending speculation would not harm the global economy, they said. Indeed, they argued that the world economy had no need for anything like the modern stock market for “hundreds of thousands of years.” The Ludendorffs supported private property, but they did not support the accumulation of it. The modern stock market, according to the Ludendorffs, was a product of global capitalism and a means to “gain profit without labor and concentrate property in the hands of the capitalists; in other words, Jewish, Masonic, and priestly insiders.”⁵² For them, global capitalism remained a tool for easy profit and exploitation. The Ludendorffs had concocted an ill-defined socialist, capitalist, and nationalist compromise that sought to promote economic equality in society while protecting an individual’s right to pursue

⁵¹ Ludendorff, *Feldherrnworte*, vol. 1, 63.

⁵² Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff, “Goldwährung” in *Judenmacht*, 398.

personal economic aims. However, they did not suggest any thorough and well-conceived economic alternative to either. They only understood that capitalism and socialism were tools used by malevolent forces to destroy Germany.

The *überstaatliche Mächte* had motives for prolonging Germany's economic crises during the 1920s and 1930s. As capitalists made financial gains, they undermined German strength in order to create a single world government in the aftermath of Germany's economic collapse. Socialists, in the meantime, divided the nation, thereby fostering political instability. Ludendorff argued that Europe faced a catastrophic war in which Germany would witness destruction unseen since the Thirty-Years War in the first half of the seventeenth century. Germany would become the battleground for Italy, the Soviet Union, and France, or, as Ludendorff preferred, Catholicism, Communism, and Freemasonry, although he added that "however much the slogans may differ they are all uttered with a Jewish accent."⁵³ Perhaps basing his argument on a nationalist military study published before World War I,⁵⁴ he wrote: "[The supranational powers], incidentally, hope that the slaughter will put an end to the economic crisis [the Great Depression]. There are a great many superfluous people in the world, apart from twenty million excess Germans [as claimed by the supranational powers]. 'If millions were to die, the survivors would get rich and be relieved of a great deal of anxiety.' A war,

⁵³ Ludendorff, *The Coming War*, 14.

⁵⁴ Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, trans. Allen H. Powles (New York: Longman, Green, and Co., 1914).

moreover, would enable the financial world to make big profits.”⁵⁵ Germany would never reap any of these rewards since the nation would be annihilated.

Defections from Ludendorff's camp

As Ludendorff chased more conspiracies, Hitler, with an irresistible combination of charisma, audacity, and, most importantly after 1930, electoral success, entranced an increasing number of Ludendorff's supporters. At the Nuremberg party congress of August 1929, Hitler aided the migration to the NSDAP by embracing the radical nationalist veterans' organizations, many of which had already pledged to support the Nazis.⁵⁶ Ludendorff, alienating so many radical nationalist groups, furthered the very objective he opposed: a unified radical nationalist movement under Hitler's sole leadership.

The defections from Ludendorff's organization came slowly, but as soon as the desertions reached the tipping point, organizations associated with the Tannenbergbund quickly abandoned the movement. In May 1928, the DVFP, weary of Ludendorff's legal entanglements, wanted to get out of his shadow.⁵⁷ Two months later, at the end of July, the German-*Völkisch* Officers' Association, an organization which Ludendorff himself had helped to organize and the primary sponsor of the *Deutsche Wochenschau*, split acrimoniously from the Tannenbergbund, leading some newspapers to report that the

⁵⁵ Ludendorff, *The Coming War*, 12. I have improved the translation.

⁵⁶ Orlow, *History of the Nazi Party*, vol. 1, 173.

⁵⁷ *Völkischer Beobachter*, May 6-7, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

organization had collapsed into chaos.⁵⁸ More damaging, the leader of the German-*Völkisch* Officers' Association, retired general Adolf Aechter, was also the *Landesführer* of Tannenbergbund South, located in Bavaria. The split greatly weakened Ludendorff's movement, and the defection tempted smaller member organizations to do the same. Ludendorff tried to halt the disintegration by merging the Tannenbergbund with the only large *völkisch* organization still loyal to him: the Front Warriors' Association.⁵⁹ Ludendorff ultimately failed to rebuild the Tannenbergbund around the organization despite his long intimacy with the Front Warriors' Association. Defecting in June 1929, the Front Warriors' Association joined the NSDAP, thereby destroying what little solidarity remained in the Tannenbergbund. The desertion merely made formal what had already occurred; the *Bundesführer* of the Front Warriors' Association, retired first lieutenant Hugo Alletter, explained that his sympathies lay with the NSDAP and that most members of his organization already belonged to the party,⁶⁰ even though Hitler forbade such dual-membership.

Also damaging was Ludendorff's frequent quarrels with the Stahlhelm.⁶¹

Although the two remained separate organizations, their membership often overlapped

⁵⁸ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, July 30, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs); *Hannoversche Landeszeitung*, August 1, 1928. BA, Zsg 103/8602 (Ludendorff, Erich).

⁵⁹ *Münchener Post*, August 9, 1928. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁶⁰ *Jungdeutsch*, October 11, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁶¹ For a thorough analysis of the Stahlhelm, see Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm: Bund der Frontsoldaten, 1918-1935* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1966).

with each other and with other radical nationalist organizations. Some elements of the Front Warriors' Association, while still connected with the Tannenbergbund, merged with the Stahlhelm. Ludendorff carried the responsibility for causing these rifts. In one example demonstrating his lack of foresight, during a lecture trip to Pomerania he accused the Stahlhelm of being under the influence of Freemasonry. Spectators at a lecture in Greifenberg regretted that Ludendorff, in his address, had antagonized *Frontsoldaten* (front soldiers).⁶² At the end of the month, a representative in the Prussian parliament, speaking in front of a joint Agrarian League (*Landbund*), Stahlhelm, and DNVP meeting in *Kreis* (County) Randow in Prussia, expressed his bewilderment at Ludendorff's denunciations, finding it incomprehensible that the Tannenbergbund would attack nationalist organizations sympathetic to him and his movement.⁶³

The Stahlhelm took Ludendorff's accusations seriously. It spent a considerable amount of energy refuting his allegation that the organization accepted Freemasons as members. Ludendorff refused to retract his statements even after the Stahlhelm insisted that it accepted only "German" men into the organization and rejected not only Freemasons but Jesuits as well.⁶⁴ By March 1930, the two movements had diverged, and Ludendorff proclaimed that the Tannenbergbund and the Stahlhelm would "no longer

⁶² *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 23, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁶³ *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 23, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁶⁴ *Münchener Post*, March 27, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

fight side by side.’⁶⁵ The claims and counter-claims issued by the Tannenbergbund and the Stahlhelm ruined any chance that the two organizations would pool their resources in the future. The already fractured Tannenbergbund shattered irreparably, driving more and more splinter groups into the expanding NSDAP.

In one early instance, the Tannenbergbund’s loss proved to be a great gain for the NSDAP. Hierl, a founding member of the Tannenbergbund, was more than a self-serving opportunist; he had talent. At the end of 1927, he left the Tannenbergbund and joined the NSDAP, citing differences of opinion with Ludendorff. By 1928 Hierl had become an important Nazi administrator, responsible for training party members for state employment.⁶⁶ At the beginning of 1929, he became the leader of the Military Policy Union (*Wehrpolitischen Vereinigung*), an informal right-wing organization in Munich that discussed German military policy. On August 4, 1929, he formally addressed the NSDAP party congress on the formation of German military policy. Gregor Strasser, clearly impressed with the speaker, appointed him military advisor to the party and head of the *Reichsorganisationsleitung II*, the party’s office responsible for coordinating political decisions between the NSDAP leadership and its representatives in the *Gaue*.⁶⁷ In September 1930, he was elected to the Reichstag.⁶⁸ Hitler later appointed him to head

⁶⁵ *Münchener Post*, March 18-19, 1930. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁶⁶ Alan Bullock, *Hitler. A Study in Tyranny* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 141.

⁶⁷ Police headquarters in Berlin to Munich local police, May 16, 1931. NA, file T581 (HdN), BDC A3345, Series DS G147 (Film Series 8270 HdN).

⁶⁸ Schwarz, *Handbuch der Reichstage*, 672.

the Reich Labor Service (*Reichsarbeitsdienst*) during the Third Reich.⁶⁹ His talent impressed Goebbels, who wrote, "The Labor Service is a wonderful organization. Hierl has built it up magnificently. . . . He is an *alter Kämpfer* (old fighter). The cultural life of the Labor Service is admirable. What a difference from the SA, for example."⁷⁰

Another former supporter who defected to the NSDAP was Ahlemann.

Tannenbergbund members felt betrayed by Ahlemann's opportunistic maneuvering; they could not fathom how such a faithful compatriot could switch loyalties so quickly.⁷¹

Ludendorff understood that he had lost a valuable ally and believed that the NSDAP had acquired an important and influential friend. After the founding of the Tannenbergbund, Ahlemann had put at Ludendorff's disposal the resources of his newspaper the *Deutsche Wochenschau*, which quickly became Ludendorff's platform for his movement. From its inception, the *Deutsche Wochenschau* served as a bulletin board for the various *völkisch* organizations in Germany, but by 1927 Ludendorff assumed greater control over the content of the paper. The newspaper was not very large - usually four pages, never more than twelve - but it had a modest circulation and, at least until 1928, was profitable.⁷² The loss of the newspaper did little to harm Ludendorff's ability to publish and distribute his

⁶⁹ *Das Deutsche Führerlexikon, 1934/1935* (Berlin: Verlagsanstalt Otto Stollberg, 1935).

⁷⁰ Diary entry for September 9, 1937. Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, Teil I, Band 4 (März 1937-November 1937) (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2000), 302.

⁷¹ Karl Zürcher to Ludendorff, January 13, 1930. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 9, 131.

⁷² Piazza, "Ludendorff," 109-10.

propaganda, but he still considered Ahlemann's defection a blow to the Tannenbergbund since the *Deutsche Wochenschau* enjoyed a wide audience in radical nationalist circles. Ahlemann's career as a Nazi was not as illustrious as Hierl's, but he did become a Reichstag Nazi delegate from the electoral district of Schleswig-Holstein in November 1933.⁷³

The underlying reasons for the defection, buried in recriminations and counter-recriminations, are unclear, although it appears that in the beginning of 1928 financial difficulties at the *Deutsche Wochenschau* contributed to tension between Ludendorff and Ahlemann. Strain between the two men had increased since the previous summer, when a few veterans' associations connected with the Tannenbergbund began to withdraw from the federation. Ludendorff claimed that Ahlemann had embezzled Ludendorff's financial contributions to the paper. Ahlemann, in turn, accused Ludendorff of withholding royalties and refusing to make proper restitution to the paper.

After the loss of the *Deutsche Wochenschau*, Ludendorff founded his own publishing house with its own newspaper dedicated to propagating his ideology. The new organ, introduced on May 1, 1929, met instant hostility. Ludendorff wished to call it *Ludendorffs Wochenschau*, but Ahlemann threatened to sue him because this name was too similar to that of Ahlemann's newspaper. Ludendorff capitulated and changed the name of the new paper to *Ludendorffs Volkswarte*. Ahlemann immediately used the *Deutsche Wochenschau* to attack Ludendorff's new enterprise. He bitterly blamed the Ludendorffs for deliberately printing libelous statements that exposed Ahlemann to

⁷³ Schwarz, *Handbuch der Reichstage*, 608.

lawsuits, and claimed that Ludendorff's new paper would be under his wife's influence.⁷⁴ He was correct to suggest that the new enterprise would be under Mathilde Ludendorff's supervision; Ludendorff rarely took an interest in his business concerns.⁷⁵

Hatred for Mathilde Ludendorff

It is significant that Ahlemann criticized Ludendorff by blaming his wife for his irrational behavior. He justified his defection by claiming that Ludendorff, under the influence of his wife, had weakened the German people because he disheartened them and sapped their will to fight.⁷⁶ Ahlemann's opinion of Mathilde Ludendorff paralleled the radical German nationalist opinion of her. While most radical nationalists were reluctant to criticize Ludendorff directly, they were more than willing to criticize his wife and expose her as a fraud, hoping that Ludendorff would realize she was a charlatan, divorce her, and return to mainstream radical German nationalism. Indeed, one medical doctor, Karl Strünckmann of Blankenburg am Harz, hoped that Hitler would ignore Ludendorff's quarrels, for someday Ludendorff would "awaken from the suggestive influence of his wife." Left to himself, the doctor argued, Ludendorff would eventually free himself, realize his potential as a military leader, and help liberate the German people and lead them to greatness. The process would prove painful, he added, but it was

⁷⁴ *Bayerischer Kurier*, April 28, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁷⁵ Piazza, "Ludendorff," 110.

⁷⁶ Georg Ahlemann, *Der Nationalismus in Abwehr: Antwort auf Ludendorffs "Weltkrieg droht"* (Großenhain: Verlagsdruckerei Hans Plasnik, 1931), 64.

necessary for future German freedom.⁷⁷ For the rest of Ludendorff's life, radical German nationalists, frustrated that Ludendorff continued to condemn himself to the margins of their movement, directed their most vociferous attacks against Mathilde Ludendorff, not her husband. She became the scapegoat for her husband's failure.

Ahlemann propagated rumors that Ludendorff's wife had a scandalous past, hinting that she had a dark, immoral history and had dishonestly ensnared Ludendorff in marriage. Hitler may have helped to spread this rumor, for he claimed at least once that she had tried to trick him into marrying her before she married Ludendorff.⁷⁸ In 1930, explaining his position in two long letters to Ludendorff, Ahlemann hoped that he could enlighten Ludendorff to the dangers he faced as her husband. It is unclear whether Ludendorff knew the rumors of his wife's questionable past, and it appears that Ahlemann never submitted to Ludendorff substantial proof supporting his accusations. According to Ahlemann, when Mathilde was twenty-five and an employee of the aristocratic von Kemnitz family, she had a three-year affair with their nineteen-year old son, Gustav. She later had children by him, after which the two lovers married. The rest of the Kemnitz family did not recognize the marriage, and after the death of her husband in 1917, the family legally disinherited the children. Ahlemann, with twisted logic, insisted that the marriage, never recognized by the family, was therefore never a

⁷⁷ Dr. med. Karl Strünckmann to Hitler, March 20, 1929. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁷⁸ William Sheridan Allen, ed., *The Infancy of Nazism: The Memoirs of Ex-Gauleiter Albert Krebs, 1923-1933* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976), 154-55.

marriage; Mathilde was therefore morally suspect because she was the mother of illegitimate children.

Ahlemann had more accusations. According to Ahlemann, while acting as the chief doctor in an officer's hospital during the war, Mathilde had an affair with a Major Kleine and experienced an "erotic rebirth." He also insinuated that nude photographs of Mathilde existed. Furthermore, he told Ludendorff that she began her political education under "the Jew [Kurt] Eisner,"⁷⁹ the radical socialist Minister President of Bavaria immediately after World War I. According to her detractors, she "poisoned morality, was no religious figure,"⁸⁰ and remained a closet Marxist contaminated by Judaism.

It is difficult to verify the truth of Ahlemann's allegations. Although he did not have the best of intentions when he confronted Ludendorff, at least some of the details of Ahlemann's accusations appear correct. Nude photographs of her might have existed, for Hitler mentioned at least once that the party archive possessed incriminating photographs of Mathilde, although he declined to elaborate on them and refused to make them public.⁸¹ In 1904, when she was twenty-seven, Mathilde married Gustav von Kemnitz and had three children with him, although Kemnitz was older than nineteen years when he began his relationship with Mathilde. After Kemnitz's death, she married Major

⁷⁹ Ahlemann to Ludendorff, September 9, 1930. NA, file T581 (HdN), BDC A3345, Series DS G146 (Film Series 8270 HdN).

⁸⁰ Ahlemann to Ludendorff, October 5, 1929. NA, file T581 (HdN), BDC A3345, Series DS G146 (Film Series 8270 HdN).

⁸¹ *Hitler's Secret Conversations*, 128.

Kleine in 1919, but the marriage ended abruptly.⁸² Nevertheless, malicious rumors about Mathilde, including a claim that she had sexually enslaved Ludendorff,⁸³ circulated in Nazi circles for the rest of her husband's life. These rumors probably tell us more about Nazi attitudes toward aggressive, headstrong, and independent women than about the character of Ludendorffs' marriage.

Ludendorff aggressively defended Mathilde, correctly interpreting the allegations as slanderous lies designed to destroy his wife's reputation. Ludendorff tried to sue Ahlemann for libel⁸⁴ but the posturing merely satisfied Ludendorff's sense of honor. Ahlemann's accusation had harmed him. For a moment in the summer of 1930, Ludendorff may have reconsidered his marriage, for Munich newspapers reported a court entry from July 15 that outlined the legal separation of property between Ludendorff and Mathilde.⁸⁵ It is possible that he was trying to protect their property from claims on it by his opponents, but this speculation is difficult to prove. A month later rumors circulated throughout Germany that he wished to separate from her and that the two had reached a settlement,⁸⁶ yet nothing of the sort appears to have happened. Indeed, he became more

⁸² Uhle-Wettler, *Erich Ludendorff*, 406.

⁸³ Breucker, *Die Tragik Ludendorffs*, 158. Quoted in Uhle-Wettler, *Erich Ludendorff*, 406.

⁸⁴ *Einbecker Tageblatt*, March 19-20, 1932. BA, Zsg. 103/8603 (Ludendorff, Erich).

⁸⁵ *Münchener Post*, July 24, 1930. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

⁸⁶ *Westfälische Allgemeine Volkszeitung*, August 21, 1930. BHStA, Slg Personen 2545 (Zeitungsausschnitte zur Person Erich Ludendorffs).

defensive about her reputation and always insisted that she be treated as his equal. Any reconciliation with him necessarily entailed reconciliation with her. Regardless of the truth behind the hateful rumors, Ludendorff lost many valuable allies because of their distaste for his wife.

Opportunities squandered

Although the Tannenbergbund's organizational structure had dissolved by 1929, and it had lost a significant portion of its membership, it still functioned as a vehicle for disseminating propaganda published by the Ludendorff Press. After the collapse of the German economy in 1930, the political landscape altered. Political figures espousing radical programs became acceptable in Germany, and the German people appeared willing to consider political, social, and economic experimentation, although doubtless most Germans still viewed Ludendorff with considerable skepticism. At the beginning of the 1930s, an opening for Ludendorff appeared when Germans proved more willing to support radical political programs. The NSDAP, along with the German Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, or KPD), experienced a surge in popularity. Ludendorff stood to gain from the change in circumstances, but he was slow to recognize the opportunity given him. Instead of addressing the concerns of unemployed Germans, he emphasized the intellectual aspects of his movement and intensified his efforts to infiltrate schools and universities with his publications. Practical-minded subordinates less interested in Ludendorff's struggle for the spiritual soul of Germany, most notably Herbert Frank, tried very hard to convince him to alter his strategy, arguing that he had

the potential to win the interest of German workers and recruit them to his cause if only he addressed economic issues.

Frank himself belatedly acknowledged the political strength of the workers. Until 1930, he disdained their obsession with purely material concerns and their lack of interest in spiritual and philosophical matters. When, in May 1929, the German Workers' Association (*Bund Deutscher Arbeiter*), a nationalist workers' organization, expressed concern that the Tannenbergbund had no economic ideas,⁸⁷ Frank replied that workers remained ignorant of political matters and were too concerned with economics.⁸⁸ He quickly re-evaluated his opinion when the German economy collapsed and he himself faced unemployment. Frank suggested that the Tannenbergbund modernize⁸⁹ and pressed Ludendorff for a decision concerning the working class,⁹⁰ although he was still impractical enough to inquire if the KPD was a Jewish or Masonic organization; in his opinion, such knowledge would help him win the support of employees in his factory.⁹¹ It seemed to Frank, however, that Ludendorff was more concerned about manipulating

⁸⁷ Fritz Schönberger of the Bund Deutscher Arbeiter to Frank, May 19, 1929. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 28.

⁸⁸ Frank to Schönberger, June 2, 1929. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 28.

⁸⁹ Frank to Ludendorff, July 29, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

⁹⁰ Frank to Ludendorff, August 9, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

⁹¹ Frank to Ludendorff, August 16, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

student elections in German universities⁹² and expanding the Tannenbergbund Student Association into secondary schools⁹³ than about strengthening the presence of the Tannenbergbund in the workplace.

At the end of 1930, Ludendorff belatedly realized that he needed some working class support if he wished to become a political force. In the beginning of October, and again at the end of November, he stressed to Frank that he wanted the workers in his camp.⁹⁴ It is unclear why Ludendorff waited so long to heed Frank's advice. Perhaps stunned by the NSDAP's enormous and surprising electoral success in the Reichstag election of September 1930, he sought a political base with which to compete against the Nazis. After another month of begging, Frank finally convinced Ludendorff to publish a pamphlet that included two treatises: *Der arbeitende Mensch in der Wirtschaft* (*The Working Man in the Economy*) and *Der Arbeiter und wir* (*We and the Worker*).⁹⁵ The pamphlet, which Frank distributed throughout his firm, had little impact. Worse for Frank, his factory closed at the end of February 1931. Ludendorff and his wife sent him their sympathy and asked him to become the regional Ludendorff Press distributor for

⁹² Ludendorff to Frank, June 30, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

⁹³ Dr. Georg Stolte of the Tannenbergbund Student Association to all *Landesführer*, July 8, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 28.

⁹⁴ Ludendorff to Frank, October 8, 1930; Ludendorff to all *Landesführer*, November 29, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

⁹⁵ Frank to Ludendorff, January 11, 1931. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

Tannenbergbund West, situated in the Ruhr and Lower Rhine valleys as well as Westphalia.⁹⁶

The Ludendorffs had managed to keep their press solvent in the years prior to the Great Depression. In 1929, Ludendorff proudly reported to the regional leaders of the Tannenbergbund that his enterprise had made a profit of 3,300.82 Marks, after taxes, charges, capital improvements, and return of merchandise. The Ludendorff Press also refunded 4,322.45 Marks to distributors for the cost of postage. This figure that hints at a wide distribution of his publications. The Ludendorff Press was also able to deposit 15,000 Marks into its bank account, which held 28,412.49 Marks, although the Press was deeply in debt and suffered from a high rate of returned merchandise. The state of the enterprise's finances convinced Ludendorff to earmark 7,187.06 Marks for the Tannenbergbund organization.⁹⁷ It is unclear whether these figures are credible, but it is clear that his press was profitable to some degree. In 1930, he published 200,000 copies of *Weltkrieg droht auf deutschem Boden*, which was later translated into seven languages.⁹⁸ He had enough funds to publish a large number of books. His profits might not have been large, but the black ink proved that his business was viable and that more than a few Germans read his publications.

⁹⁶ Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff to Frank, February 18, 1931. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

⁹⁷ Ludendorff to all Tannenbergbund *Landesführer*, February 20, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

⁹⁸ Uhle-Wettler, *Erich Ludendorff*, 408.

Compared to other publishing houses that published and distributed works similar to those printed by the Ludendorff Press, Ludendorff's concern was successful. According to Gary D. Stark, during the Weimar Republic publishing houses that published material similar to Ludendorff's were often short-lived. They printed a journal or a newspaper designed to advance the publisher's political ideas and quickly disappeared as soon as publication ceased. Their publications rarely enjoyed a circulation greater than a few thousand copies.⁹⁹ In this respect, the longevity of the Ludendorff Press, which remained viable until 1945, is noteworthy. The number of printed copies of *Weltkrieg droht auf deutschem Boden* is also astonishing, since it was extraordinary for a small publisher to sell more than 100,000 copies of a book.¹⁰⁰ In fact, despite its bizarre thesis, *Weltkrieg droht auf deutschem Boden* was the sort of work that interested many Germans of the time. Stark concludes that fiction and non-fiction books dealing with racial themes and World War I proved enormously popular in Germany during the interwar years.¹⁰¹ Although Stark admits that it is difficult to determine who bought such publications and how they affected their readers,¹⁰² it appears that Ludendorff had an audience willing to spend money on Ludendorff Press publications.

⁹⁹ Gary D. Stark, *Entrepreneurs of Ideology. Neoconservative Publishers in Germany, 1890-1933* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 11-12.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 241.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 242-43.

¹⁰² Ibid., 240-41.

The Ludendorff Press also employed a cadre of dedicated activists, unlike other similar publishers. On their own initiative, these agents had extended the Tannenbergbund into Catholic regions of western Germany by early 1930. Some of these activists were themselves Catholic, a fact that bothered the leadership of the Ludendorff movement. One activist stated that despite his own Catholicism, he agreed with much of Mathilde Ludendorff's philosophy.¹⁰³ Frank told Ludendorff that the members of the Tannenbergbund organization in Cologne still had not left the Catholic Church.¹⁰⁴ In western Germany, at least, Ludendorff's organization grew with the help of a few Catholic nationalists, but these organizers were the exception in the Ludendorff movement.

The notable increase in radical nationalist activity in western Germany at the beginning of the 1930s demonstrated the haphazard, arbitrary, and spontaneous nature of the Tannenbergbund. Frank encouraged one radical nationalist activist in Catholic Aachen to found an organization that would then associate itself with the Tannenbergbund federation. At first, the activist worried that he could not do so in Aachen because he had lost the whole region to the Nazis.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, after a few months he organized a youth group, Frontier Wolf (*Grenzwolf*), and then merged it with

¹⁰³ Hugo Ewel to Frank, February 1, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

¹⁰⁴ Frank to Ludendorff, February 4, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

¹⁰⁵ Ernst Thalheim to Frank, February 7, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

the Tannenbergbund.¹⁰⁶ This activist's strategy was typical of most Tannenbergbund organizers. They first formed small local or regional organizations consisting of people from a particular class, occupation, or age, and they then declared their loyalty to Ludendorff and his much larger federation. This strategy worked well as long as local organizations maintained harmonious working relationships with other radical nationalist groups in the area. If they did not, intrigue, rivalry, and competition between member organizations fragmented the Tannenbergbund in that particular region. The Tannenbergbund organization in Berlin dissolved because it had poor relations with other nationalist groups in the area,¹⁰⁷ and Frank often complained that quarrels between local leaders of Tannenbergbund member organizations weakened the movement.¹⁰⁸ In all instances, however, these new local organizations were too small to have any political impact. In most instances, they also supported the NSDAP.

Ludendorff continued to struggle against the rising popularity of Nazism. Radical German nationalists sympathized with him but he alienated his more practical-minded allies. Blaming Mathilde Ludendorff for her husband's behavior, they had lost patience with their mentor and turned to the NSDAP for guidance. As the NSDAP grew in strength, it absorbed the defectors from Ludendorff's movement. In response, Ludendorff stepped up his shrill criticism of Nazism, further isolating his movement. By

¹⁰⁶ Frank to Ludendorff, April 10, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

¹⁰⁷ Frank to Ludendorff, February 11, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

¹⁰⁸ Frank to Ludendorff, April 10, 1930; Frank to *Bundesführer* Bronsart von Schellendorff, April 10, 1930. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 31.

the time the NSDAP acquired power, the Tannenbergbund had shrunk to approximately five to seven thousand members.¹⁰⁹ His decision to refuse reconciliation with Hitler and remain on the fringes of radical German nationalism would have dire consequences for the remainder of the Tannenbergbund when the NSDAP acquired power in January 1933. It was ironic that in 1933 Ludendorff, the consistently harsh opponent of Hitler, would find alumni from his movement, those former allies now wielding power in the NSDAP at the local and national level, in a position to influence the Nazi regime.

¹⁰⁹ This number is an estimation based on membership rolls from early 1933 in *Landesverbände Mitte* and *Südost*. The *Landesverband Mitte* claims to have had 1133 members in its region, while the smaller *Landesverband Südost* had 560 members. These figures, if averaged and multiplied by the number of regions in Germany, yield a Tannenbergbund membership of 6764 for the month of January 1933, an estimate within the range of the above approximation. Clearly, this is an extremely rough estimate. A more thorough study of the Tannenbergbund's membership is needed. Report from the Tannenbergbund *Landesverband Mitte* for January 1933. LG, folder K/IIg; Report from the Tannenbergbund *Landesleitung Südost*, January 15, 1933. LG, folder K/IIc.

Chapter 3

The Ludendorff Movement during the First Years of the Third Reich, 1933-1935

Of course I disapprove when a village hangs a straw man named "General Ludendorff." But since your complaint about the prohibition of meetings is based upon the Tannenbergbund's incorrect assessment of the situation, I request immediately an explicit statement of whether or not the Tannenbergbund stands behind the government of national revolution.¹

-- Reich Interior Minister Wilhelm Frick to the Tannenbergbund *Bundesleitung*,
April 5, 1933

Herr General Ludendorff has previously stated:

"As its objective and goal, the Tannenbergbund, under my instructions, has consistently, ruthlessly, and fiercely fought to protect the life of the nation from the international powers, wherever it saw or perceived them. The Tannenbergbund is the vanguard of the people in this battle, not only supporting their interests but also championing them. It fights without compromise unlike the government, which until now has made tactical allowances. The Tannenbergbund will stop this policy."

I present this expression of the *Feldherr*'s will as the answer to the letter stated above.²

-- Tannenbergbund *Bundesleitung* to Frick, April 10, 1933

In recent years historians have questioned the authenticity of Ludendorff's famous prophesy in which he warned President Hindenburg, "By naming Hitler as Chancellor, you have delivered our holy German Fatherland to one of the greatest demagogues of all

¹ Reich Interior Minister Wilhelm Frick to the Tannenbergbund *Bundesleitung*, April 5, 1933. LG, folder K/IIC.

² Tannenbergbund *Bundesleitung* to Frick, April 10, 1933. LG, folder K/IIC.

time. . . . Future generations will damn you in your grave for what you have done.” No copy of this message has been found.³ Regardless of the veracity of his statement, Ludendorff remained skeptical of Nazism and wary of Hitler’s intentions. Unlike other opponents of Nazism, he was able to voice his hostility to Nazism. In general, the Nazi regime tolerated his dissent.

Responding to the NSDAP’s acquisition of power, Ludendorff sought to reinvent the Tannenbergbund again, making it the conscience of the German nationalist revolution. Ludendorff Press, the propaganda vehicle designed to define his movement and achieve its goals, was central to realizing this aim. He expected his movement to ensure that the Third Reich represented the will of all radical German nationalists, not only Nazis. His zeal often annoyed the Nazi regime. The party hierarchy feared that radical activists in the Nazi rank-and-file would turn to Ludendorff for inspiration and reject Hitler if it appeared to them that Hitler was not radical enough. This was a realistic concern, for in the early years of the Third Reich most Nazi radicals were members of the paramilitary SA, many of whom had connections to veteran’s organizations formerly associated with the Tannenbergbund. For the party hierarchy, Ludendorff represented a dangerous threat to internal party stability.

³ Quoted in Buchheim, *Gutachten*, 367. Buchheim gives no reference for this quotation. See Fritz Tobias, “Ludendorff, Hindenburg, Hitler: Das Phantasieprodukt des Ludendorff-Briefes vom 30 Januar 1933,” in *Die Schatten der Vergangenheit: Impulse zur Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Uwe Backes, et. al. (Frankfurt am Main: n.p., 1992), 319-43; and Lothar Gruchmann, “Ludendorffs ‘prophetischer’ Brief an Hindenburg vom Januar/Februar 1933,” *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 47, no. 4 (1999): 559-62. Gruchmann argues that no evidence of Ludendorff’s message exists, and that historians have considered it authentic simply because Buchheim quoted it in *Gutachten*.

His activities also threatened to lead to social unrest. After 1933, the Ludendorff Press continued to publish *völkisch* newspapers, military studies, and political journals. It also sponsored lecture tours designed to explain *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*. The harsh anti-Catholic rhetoric found in his publications and lectures infuriated German Catholics in the southern and western portions of Germany. Many incorrectly assumed that the NSDAP aided and supported Ludendorff's rants. The Nazi regime quickly realized that if unhindered the Ludendorff Press would harm public opinion of Nazism. Ludendorff also tried to convince the army General Staff that *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* must serve as a foundation for a spiritually unified military, demanding that it eradicate Christianity from military life.

The delicate balance between controlling Ludendorff and allowing him freedom to propagate radical nationalist ideology was difficult to maintain. From its ascension to power to Ludendorff's seventieth birthday on April 9, 1935, the regime faced this difficult task with a surprising lack of confidence. It had to silence Ludendorff's outspoken criticism of Nazism while maintaining his stature as a nationalist hero. It had to earn the loyalty and confidence of the military without denigrating one of its most illustrious former commanders. It also had to maintain its own authority among radical nationalists without allowing Ludendorff too much freedom to cause mischief. Yet despite their diatribes against international conspiracies, Judaism, and Catholicism, his publications were sometimes useful for Nazi purposes and, when handled correctly, aided the regime in transforming Germany into a National Socialist society. The party had a difficult tightrope to walk.

As a result, the Nazi regime vacillated between embracing and denouncing Ludendorff. For the first two years of the Nazi regime, Hitler suppressed but did not destroy Ludendorff's movement. At the same time, the party struggled to reconcile the differences between it and Ludendorff while trying to diminish his influence within the NSDAP. Ludendorff was able to get away with subversive activities because Hitler admired him considerably,⁴ but because of Ludendorff's obstinate, almost spiteful, distrust of the Nazi leader, he was slow to grasp Hitler's olive branch. In the meantime, Ludendorff's more practical followers such as Holtzmann and Frank sought to comply with the letter, if not the spirit, of Nazi regulations in order to dissuade the regime from initiating further restrictions on their mentor's movement.

The first acts of terror

Almost immediately after the NSDAP acquired power, Ludendorff, arguing that the Nazis and the Tannenbergbund shared the same radical nationalist goals, sought to convince the new regime that it should not prohibit Tannenbergbund activity. Yet in pamphlets, journals, and lectures, Ludendorff and his supporters openly criticized the NSDAP. To the delight of radical Nazis, he complained that the new National Socialist

⁴ In October 1953, retired lieutenant colonel Dr. Wilhelm Höttl recalled a conversation he had at Nuremberg in November 1945 with former Defense Minister General Werner von Blomberg and former Austrian Vice-Chancellor Edmund Glaise von Horstenau. Blomberg had described to Höttl the astonishing amount of respect (*Respektskomplex*) Hitler had for Ludendorff. Dr. Wilhelm Höttl to August Lindner, October 26, 1953. BA, NL 254 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 25, 189. Holtzmann agreed. In April 1946, in front of the Interallied Military Tribunal, he stated that Ludendorff was the only man whom Hitler respected. Robert Holtzmann to the president of the Interallied Military Tribunal, April 27, 1946. BA, NL 254 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 25, 168.

regime was not radical enough, especially in matters concerning the political and social role of the Catholic Church in Germany.

A few Nazis were pleased to have the opportunity to harass Ludendorff activists for their persistent opposition. In February 1933, almost immediately after the NSDAP gained power, the Nazi regime granted the SA license to act as auxiliary police, thereby creating administrative chaos, antagonizing local police, and legitimizing the acts of wanton brutality committed by SA men seeking revenge against opponents. A few regional governments and some local police, assisted by the SA, initiated restrictions against Tannenbergbund activity. It is important to note that these restrictions were rare, and that Nazis abused other Germans, such as Communists and Jews, much more frequently and harshly than they abused Ludendorff supporters. The restrictions against Ludendorff's supporters were spontaneous and isolated local crackdowns by unrestrained zealous Nazis. In the first month of the Nazi regime, the Tannenbergbund *Landesleitung* East in East Prussia complained of Nazi smear campaigns, acts of terror, and the prohibition of meetings in some regions.⁵ The *Landesleitung* West in Westphalia and the Rhineland reported that drunken SA men with weapons had been searching, without the permission or knowledge of local police, for the regional Tannenbergbund leader.⁶ The members of Tannenbergbund Franconia, frightened by the random acts of violence,

⁵ Order no. 26, *Landesleitung Ost*, February 28, 1933, and *Landesleitung Ost* monthly report for February 1933 to *Bundesführer* Walter Siegfried Bronsart von Schellendorff, March 10, 1933. LG, folder K/IIc.

⁶ *Landesleitung West* to Ludendorff, March 10, 1933. LG, folder K/IIg.

demanded the *Landesleitung* of Franconia to stop including their names in administrative reports.⁷

In April 1933, the first official steps against the Tannenbergbund came from a State Commissar in northwestern Germany. Arguing that it endangered public security and order, he banned distribution of *Ludendorffs Volkswarte* for one month after it published an article that was “scornful” of President Hindenburg and Chancellor Hitler.⁸ This action against Ludendorff’s movement formalized local sporadic anti-Ludendorff activity in Esser’s jurisdiction. Yet despite their many complaints about mistreatment by Nazi officials, it appears that few members left the Tannenbergbund during the first six months of the Third Reich. It is probable that those most likely to defect to the NSDAP had already done so before 1933, leaving the most stubborn anti-Nazis behind. Membership data for Ludendorff’s organization after 1932 is scant. The existing statistics indicate that the Nazi suppression of Tannenbergbund activity during the spring and summer of 1933 did not lead Tannenbergbund members to abandon Ludendorff’s organization but instead convinced the majority of them to halt their activities voluntarily. Indeed, in June 1933 Tannenbergbund Center in Thuringia and the Main valley reported a modest increase of thirty members since the previous January, for a regional total of 1161 members. On the other hand, it appears that the new members shunned the larger *Kampfgruppen* (fighting groups) and instead joined small *Kampfzellen* (fighting cells), often consisting of one individual and never more than a handful of people.

⁷ *Landesführer Franken* to the Tannenbergbund *Bundesleitung*, March 12, 1933. LG, folder K/IIg.

⁸ *Niederdeutsche Zeitung*, April 13, 1933. BA, folder Zsg. 103/8603.

It is possible that enemies of Nazism, such as Communists and Social Democrats, were using the Tannenbergbund to hide from the regime. In fact, the greatest increases in membership for Tannenbergbund Center came from places where one would expect to find Communists and Social Democrats: the relatively urban *Gaue* of southeastern Saxony, northern Saxony, and the Saale valley, which include the industrial centers of Dresden, Leipzig, and Halle, respectively. *Gau* Kyffhäuser reported to *Landesleitung* Center that a known Communist sympathizer wished to join the Tannenbergbund.⁹ It appears that something similar occurred in Braunschweig, where in 1933 a number of Communists attempted to join the Stahlhelm.¹⁰ Communists in Braunschweig remained active until early 1935, and in the summer of that year, the KPD, following the suggestion of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, adopted a “Trojan horse” strategy, in which KPD activists infiltrated Nazi organizations in order to weaken them.¹¹ From existing evidence, it is unclear whether Communists and Social Democrats in any substantial and meaningful numbers tried to join the Ludendorff movement. If they did, it is unclear whether they joined for political reasons or for self-preservation. Scholars must investigate this question more thoroughly.

⁹ Report from *Gau* Kyffhäuser, *Kampfzelle* Uder, June 19, 1933. LG, folder K/IIg.

¹⁰ Walter Struve, *Aufstieg und Herrschaft des Nationalsozialismus in einer industriellen Kleinstadt: Osterode am Harz 1918-1945* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1992), 226-31.

¹¹ Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 286-98.

Regardless of the reasons behind the modest increase in membership, this development also indicates that the Tannenbergbund was atomizing and its members isolated, further weakening its organizational integrity.¹² There is also evidence that in May 1933 the Ludendorff Press continued to distribute through the mail the *Ludendorffs Volkswarte* to subscribers in Tannenbergbund Center despite restrictions on the newspaper. In that month 1790 subscribers received the newspaper, a slight increase from the beginning of the year, although growth had slowed since April.¹³ Scholars must view these numbers with some caution, for not all *Gaue* in Tannenbergbund Center reported their membership rolls for June 1933. There are also inconsistencies in the reports from the *Landesleitung* Center, and some of their arithmetic calculations are incorrect. It would be a mistake to conclude that the increase in the membership and in the number of *Ludendorffs Volkswarte* subscribers residing in Tannenbergbund Center represented a rise in membership and subscriptions throughout the entire Tannenbergbund.

On the other hand, it does appear that during the first six months of the Third Reich, the Tannenbergbund in central Germany had no significant decline in membership or in the number of *Ludendorffs Volkswarte* subscribers, even though a few Tannenbergbund members experienced random acts of terror and some regional administrators restricted lectures sponsored, and publications distributed, by the

¹² Membership reports for January and June 1933 from *Landesleitung Mitte*. LG, folder K/IIg.

¹³ Report on *Ludendorffs Volkswarte* postal subscriptions in *Landesleitung Mitte*, May 1933. LG, folder K/IIg.

Ludendorff Press. Tannenbergbund Center reported that although some police officers had arrested Tannenbergbund members, others had demonstrated sympathy for the movement.¹⁴ Indeed, despite Ludendorff's criticism of Hitler and the NSDAP, members of the SS and SA often attended his agents' lectures and bought his publications. *Landesleitung* Center reported that members of the SA, SS, and Stahlhelm openly participated in the life of the Tannenbergbund.¹⁵ It also appears that elsewhere in Germany Nazi constraints had little effect on the Tannenbergbund. In a report to Tannenbergbund *Bundesführer* Schellendorff, the *Landesleitung* East wrote, "The position of the government on our movement differs from locality to locality. Most places do not know themselves what they should do; it is apparent that clear instructions from above do not exist. Where arbitrary acts against us have taken place, we have submitted complaints to the people concerned. At the moment, in East Prussia there are no Tannenbergers imprisoned."¹⁶

Coordination with the Nazi regime

Holtzmann in Berlin tried to downplay the hardships facing Ludendorff's movement. In June 1933, he reported to Ludendorff, "Among the German people, everywhere one hears of suppression, of bowing-to-the-inevitable, of silence, of doing

¹⁴ Circular B.Nr. 6 from *Landesleitung Mitte* to Ludendorff and the *Bundesleitung*, May 5, 1933. LG, folder K/Ilg.

¹⁵ Report on *Ludendorffs Volkswarte* subscribers from *Landesverband Mitte*, May 1933. LG, folder K/Ilg.

¹⁶ Monthly report for April 1933 from *Landesleitung Ost* to the Tannenbergbund *Bundesleitung*, May 14, 1933. LG, folder K/Ilc.

nothing! In fact, an exception is the Tannenbergbund, which, for the most part, is at least steeled, courageous, and ready to fight during the terror! One also hears, however, the question raised everywhere from a wide range of people: ‘What does Ludendorff think of this?’”¹⁷ Holtzmann reassured Ludendorff that his organization remained defiant, but he also tried to reassure the government that the Tannenbergbund had no desire to antagonize the regime. In an open letter to Hindenburg, published in *Der Tannenberger*, he claimed that

The Tannenbergbund has absolutely no motivation to scorn or agitate against the government. On the contrary, the Tannenbergbund greets with absolute conviction the awakening of all German people, the return to German thought and will, and welcomes the decision to bring about a truly *völkisch* revolution, which alone means the salvation of the German people. In this sense I beg you to interpret the work of the Tannenbergbund, and most of all that of the patron of the Tannenbergbund, His Excellency General Ludendorff, as a reminder and a warning, and as the exclusive conscience of the entire German people!¹⁸

Holtzmann, however, was at times unnecessarily brash. In June 1933, in a letter to a Nazi party administrator, he extravagantly claimed that over the years the Tannenbergbund had fought without compromise for German freedom before most members of the NSDAP even dared utter the word “*völkisch*.” He also insisted that the Tannenbergbund remained absolutely German and in its struggle refused to yield to the NSDAP, as other parties and organizations in Germany had done.¹⁹

¹⁷ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, June 5, 1933. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 9, 356.

¹⁸ Open letter from Holtzmann to Hindenburg published in *Der Tannenberger*, May 1933. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 3, 150.

¹⁹ Holtzmann to an unnamed state official, June 22, 1933. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 3, 161.

The Tannenbergbund leadership gradually became more sanguine since it understood that it was only a matter of time before the Nazi regime increased pressure on the movement. To protect the organization, the Tannenbergbund national leadership tried to comply with the regime's regulations. Its strategy was twofold: lodge formal complaints against the regime through the proper channels, and convince the regime that the Tannenbergbund posed no threat. As early as March 1933 *Bundesführer* Schellendorff ordered local Tannenbergbund leaders to notify him of all acts of terror against the Tannenbergbund so the *Bundesleitung* could determine if local officials were behind the acts.²⁰ Meanwhile, Holtzmann, who now carried the responsibility as the *de facto* Tannenbergbund plenipotentiary to the regime and the military, spent the late spring and early summer of 1933 trying to convince National Socialist authorities that Ludendorff's movement was benign. One Ludendorff supporter, Hans Georg von Waldow, *Landesführer* of Tannenbergbund North in Pomerania, Hanover, and Braunschweig, told his superiors in the Tannenbergbund *Bundesleitung* that they were in the middle of the long-awaited German Revolution and should participate.²¹ The *Landesleitung* East distributed Ludendorff publications and copies of Ludendorff's goals to Frick, Vice-Chancellor Franz von Papen, Berlin police chief Magnus von Leventzow, and other government officials so they could better understand the Ludendorff

²⁰ Order no. 31 from *Landesleitung Ost* dated March 27, 1933. LG, folder K/IIc.

²¹ Monthly report from *Landesleitung Nord*, March 31, 1933. LG, folder K/IIg.

movement.²² *Landesleitung* East then ordered its members to send Ludendorff publications to all public officials and administrators.²³

Often Ludendorff's supporters, without the knowledge of the Tannenbergbund leadership, independently contacted the regime. Trying to eliminate inconsistency, Waldow told Frank in the summer of 1933 that in the future he should direct complaints to the *Landesleitung* so the Tannenbergbund leadership could address those complaints with government and party officials.²⁴ He also hoped that Nazi officials would not find themselves overwhelmed by frivolous protests, which could lead them to take the Ludendorff movement less seriously. Frank, perhaps because he himself was a *Landesführer*, ignored Waldow's instructions and petitioned President Hindenburg to lift the restrictions on *Ludendorffs Volkswarte*.²⁵

Ludendorff himself undermined the Tannenbergbund *Bundesleitung*'s attempts to convince the regime of its benign nature. In an article published in the Tannenbergbund *Verordnungsblatt*, the organization's administrative newsletter, Ludendorff tried to reassure Tannenbergers that restrictions on their activities would not succeed; their ideas would spread irresistibly across Germany regardless of the Nazi dictatorship since the

²² *Landesführer* Wentzel of *Landesleitung Ost* to government and police administrators, May 20, 1933. LG, folder K/IIc.

²³ Circular Nr. 36 from *Landesleitung Ost* to Tannenbergbund members, May 26, 1933. LG, folder K/IIc.

²⁴ *Landesführer* Hans Georg von Waldow of *Landesleitung Nord* to Frank, July 7, 1933. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 55.

²⁵ Frank to Hindenburg, August 8, 1933. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 55.

German people throughout history had always resisted tyranny.²⁶ His defiance was obvious and had consequences. In Königsberg a lower district court fined and briefly imprisoned Frank, at the time the *Landesführer* and chief Ludendorff Press agent of Tannenbergbund West, because he had not registered with local police a Tannenbergbund meeting held in March.²⁷ Frank had also learned that Schleswig-Holstein *Gauleiter* Hinrich Lohse, as well as the governor (*Oberpräsident*) of the province, had ordered police and the SA to break up Ludendorff lectures.²⁸ Another Ludendorff supporter reported to Holtzmann that in his *Gau* Nazis had beaten his men and had searched his mail, although he offered no specific names of the offenders.²⁹

In July 1933 Hermann Göring, Prussian Interior Minister and Prussian Minister President, warned Ludendorff, “The nature and fashion of the agitation has been met with the vehement indignation of the National Socialist population, who feel that their national honor has been offended.”³⁰ The Nazi regime subsequently banned the *Ludendorffs Volkswarte* throughout the whole country in July 1933, but officials still allowed Ludendorff to continue publishing his journal, *Am heiligen Quell* (*At the Divine Source*),

²⁶ *Tannenberg Verordnungsblatt*, June 13, 1933. Quoted in Piazza, “Ludendorff,” 149.

²⁷ Lower District Court of Königsberg to Frank, June 17, 1933. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 55.

²⁸ Frank to the provincial governor of Schleswig-Holstein, June 22, 1933. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 55.

²⁹ Hermann Burr to Holtzmann, August 1, 1933. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 3, 197.

³⁰ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, July 12, 1933. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 15, 45.

but to associate clearly the publication with his movement Ludendorff had to change the title to *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft. Ludendorffs Halbmonatsschrift (At the Divine Source of German Strength. Ludendorff's Biweekly Journal)*.³¹ Although the state forbade this publication to criticize the Nazi regime, it permitted the journal to print articles against international conspiracies, Judaism, Freemasonry, Marxism, and Catholicism.

The Nazi regime finally decided to prohibit the Tannenbergbund in the autumn of 1933. At the beginning of September 1933, some *Gaue* in northwestern Germany, the same region where the first restrictions on Ludendorff's movement originated, had already forbidden all Tannenbergbund activity as well as public activity by the German People's Union (*Verein Deutschvolk*), Ludendorff's cultural organization. Bremen had already banned all Tannenbergbund political activity in the city.³² On September 22, 1933, Göring prohibited the Tannenbergbund throughout Prussia. On the following day, the regime extended the ban throughout Germany. The decree of September 23, 1933, which forbade the Tannenbergbund and the German People's Union, constituted a national ban that followed scattered bans initiated by local political and police officials.

The ban was incomplete. Ludendorff and his agents could still distribute Ludendorff's publications concerning *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* since the Nazi regime had not prohibited Ludendorff's books or his journal *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft*. It did not restrict *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* nor did it halt his anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic

³¹ Buchheim, *Gutachten*, 359.

³² *Hamburg Nachrichten*, Sept. 9, 1933. BHStA, PrASlg 1334 (Zeitungsausschnitte zum Tannenbergbund, 1921-1933).

propaganda. Ludendorff was able to continue his agitation, ensuring that his movement maintained a presence in Germany.

Explaining Ludendorff

Ludendorff was not the only *alter Kämpfer* the Nazi regime isolated at the end of 1933, but his figure still cast a long shadow over the radical nationalist movement. His old allies refused to forget him. Although the Nazi rulers, once they had gained power, cultivated new alliances as they abandoned their oldest supporters, it does appear that some radical nationalists had not overlooked Ludendorff's past contributions to the NSDAP. On November 9, 1933, when official celebrations commemorating the tenth anniversary of the failed putsch in Munich took place throughout Germany, the Nazi regime neglected to recognize a number of participants, including Ludendorff. If the selective memory of the Nazi regime hurt his pride, he did not show it. In a letter to Holtzmann, he wrote that some of the snubbed putsch participants came to visit him and paid their respects, a gesture that pleased him. He also received "numerous" affirmations of loyalty.³³ These signs of personal devotion gave him a certain sense of satisfaction.

Some radical nationalists might have interpreted the affront as an indication of Nazi weakness, and it is possible that the Nazis snubbed Ludendorff because they had no wish to alienate Hindenburg. Since the NSDAP did not enjoy the absolute confidence of all *völkisch* and nationalist Germans, the Nazi regime, by refusing to acknowledge Ludendorff's contributions to National Socialism and *völkisch* Germany, demonstrated its

³³ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, November 9, 1933. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 9, 325.

own questionable legitimacy among a segment of radical German nationalists and exposed the lack of cohesion in the party. Wilhelm Breucker, a retired officer who had served as Ludendorff's adjutant during World War I, recognized that the regime had failed to inspire all radical nationalists. In a letter to Hitler written on November 25, 1933, Breucker suggested that the NSDAP find some way to compromise with Ludendorff and end the conflict between Ludendorff and Hindenburg, thereby earning the support of all radical German nationalists:

In my opinion, it would be more likely to reach an understanding with General Ludendorff in the area of renewing the Reich, where he would look after the respective responsibilities within his special field. It should not be impossible - it seems to me - for the German people to use the experience and enterprise of a man like Ludendorff, in view of the fact that, as a result of malevolence or misunderstanding on the part of others, the foreign situation of our Fatherland is dangerous, a situation which we can only counter with the ardent desire for peace among a rearmed people. Here are my thoughts on the possibility of a reunion: not by agitating old conflicts, not through declarations, not through mere superficial reconciliation, but through new cooperation for the future of our people!³⁴

Breucker had also warned Ludendorff that if he did not compromise with the new regime his movement would be in danger of becoming a meaningless sect, suggesting that the Nazi regime offered Ludendorff an opportunity to advance his ideology and reform the Church in Germany.³⁵ Breucker understood that in an alliance between Ludendorff and the Nazi regime, the regime would completely unify radical German nationalism and Ludendorff would find an outlet for his ideology and *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*.

³⁴ Wilhelm Breucker to Hitler, November 25, 1933. IfZ, MA-744 (HdN), no. 1246 Personalsachen (Erich Ludendorff).

³⁵ Breucker to Hitler, November 25, 1933. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1246, roll 53 (Verschiedenes).

Furthermore, by brokering an end to the feud between Ludendorff and Hindenburg, the Nazi regime would find itself associated with the two great German military leaders of World War I. Once the party brought them into its camp, the loyalty of the Reichswehr would be assured. For radical German nationalists, the idea was sensible.

In the meantime, Ludendorff continued his agitation. Frank, optimistic despite the movement's recent setbacks, also increased in importance. In November 1933, he became the general distributor of Ludendorff's publications in Lower Saxony. He demonstrated tremendous initiative, as well as astonishing insubordination, during his tenure in the Ludendorff Press. In his first act as general distributor, he asked agents in Lower Saxony to increase their efforts to distribute Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff's writings and expected his subordinates to make contact with every community, village, and town in his region. He wished to increase subscriptions to *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft* through the mail, presumably because he wanted wider distribution and did not trust the viability of Ludendorff bookstores.³⁶ At the end of 1933 Frank told Ludendorff business agents in Lower Saxony that although they had to stamp all of Ludendorff's publications with the distributor's address, this restriction could work to their advantage because the stamps served as free advertisements and made it easier for interested customers to obtain more Ludendorff publications.³⁷ He even suggested that agents get to know local NSDAP, SA, SS, Hitler Youth, German Girls' Association

³⁶ Circular no. 1 from Frank to Ludendorff Press agents in Lower Saxony, November 2, 1933. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 63.

³⁷ Circular no. 3 from Frank to Ludendorff Press agents in Lower Saxony, December 28, 1933. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 63.

(*Bund deutscher Mädel*, or BdM), and National Socialist Factory Cell Organization (*Nationalsozialistische Betriebszellenorganisation*, or NSBO) officials, as well as state administrators, in order to educate them about Ludendorff's *Weltanschauung*. He also recommended that agents get licenses from the government so people would understand that they were not reading forbidden books.³⁸

In February 1934, the Nazi party agreed to meet personally with Ludendorff in order to address his activity. Rosenberg met with Ludendorff on February 22, 1934 to discuss philosophical and spiritual matters as well as the position of Ludendorff's movement in Third Reich. They agreed that the healthy soul of the German race was critical to the survival of Germany and both wanted to awaken German sensibilities to the importance of race. Rosenberg, however, explained to Ludendorff that it would not be useful if his publications went against the party's *Weltanschauung*,³⁹ hinting that the regime would allow Ludendorff to continue to publish as long as he did not cross Nazi authorities. Ludendorff wrote Holtzmann and said that he had found this conversation to be "immensely meaningful."⁴⁰ Meanwhile, throughout February, Holtzmann met with Himmler and Heß in order to convince them that Ludendorff did not pose a threat to Nazism,⁴¹ but the participants formulated no concrete proposals to lift the ban on the

³⁸ Circular no. 6 from Frank to Ludendorff Press agents in Lower Saxony, February 24, 1934. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 63.

³⁹ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, February 24, 1934. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 10, 27.

⁴⁰ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, February 24, 1934. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 10, 27.

⁴¹ Holtzmann Nachlaß (Hoover Institute). Quoted in Piazza, "Ludendorff," 152.

Tannenbergbund. These first meetings proved to be the opening sentences of a long conversation. It does appear, however, that the NSDAP recognized Ludendorff as a fellow traveler, although it clearly demonstrated that it would not tolerate any open criticism of its leadership.

Confusion on both sides

The regulations concerning the Ludendorff movement confused many police officials and local Nazi administrators. Regulations concerning published materials appeared clear: agents had to register with local authorities and could distribute only materials approved by the Reich Office of Publications (*Reichsschriftumskammer*). Nevertheless, some local Nazi administrators and police officials were unable to determine easily the legality of many of Ludendorff's publications, for the Reich Office of Publications approved some publications but not others. Frustrated local authorities, who had little guidance from their superiors, either banned all Ludendorff publications or permitted their distribution. The inconsistent enforcement of restrictions annoyed his supporters, and what officials permitted in one region was often prohibited in another. One week after his conversation with Rosenberg, Ludendorff wrote Holtzmann that in Düsseldorf it was forbidden to purchase his writings, while in neighboring Essen, Hans Kurth, a former Reichstag deputy for the German-Socialist Party (*Deutschsozialistische Partei*, or DSP)⁴² and chief of publications for the Ludendorff Press, was permitted to

⁴² Schwarz, *Handbuch der Reichstages*, 549.

speaking publicly.⁴³ These inconsistencies baffled not only Ludendorff, who became increasingly distrustful of the NSDAP, but also regional police, party, and state officials befuddled by contradictory and incomplete orders from the Nazi leadership. Himmler, who became the head of the Gestapo in April 1934, tried to eliminate the inconsistencies in policy, but his orders were piece-meal and did not institute a comprehensive ban on all of Ludendorff's activities. The Political Police at the local and regional level struggled to determine what Ludendorff's agents were permitted to do.

The quandary over Ludendorff, which the Nazi regime faced in its first two years in power, highlights one of the difficulties that plagued the Third Reich. In 1935, the Nazi regime had consolidated its authority over German society and the German state, but because of intraparty personal rivalries and Hitler's lackadaisical attitude toward the mundane tasks of everyday administration, it did not rationalize the chaotic administrative apparatus of the party itself. The party leadership, after its membership increased dramatically in the early 1930s, discovered that the party's cohesion had weakened. Furthermore, regional interest groups and personalities divided the party. As a result, the party lacked internal stability. Its large, heterogeneous membership was often at odds.⁴⁴ Once the NSDAP gained control over the German state, Nazi leaders such as Himmler, Göring, Heß, Frick, and German Labor Front leader Robert Ley, among others, scrambled to establish administrative bases from which to exert power. Hitler encouraged the rivalry between his lieutenants since it solidified his position as arbitrator

⁴³ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, March 3, 1934. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 10, 31.

⁴⁴ See Orlow, *History of the Nazi Party*, vol. 2, 18-19.

of administrative disputes. As Nazi leaders competed for administrative power, the bureaucratic efficiency of the state crumbled.⁴⁵ Only Hitler's charisma held this amorphous organization together. To confuse matters further, during the early years of the Third Reich not all state administrators and local police officials were party members, a situation that hampered the enforcement of party decrees at the local level. The uneven enforcement of Gestapo orders in the various *Gaue* points to the chaotic and arbitrary nature of Nazi policy.⁴⁶

Contradictory Nazi policy and inconsistent policy enforcement further divided Ludendorff's movement between those who wanted greater coordination with the regime and those who did not. The Political Police in Hanover reported that two prominent Tannenbergbund leaders, Waldow and Hanover *Gauführer* Friedemann Goetze, had lost the trust of local Ludendorff activists, who suspected the two were working with the Nazi movement. The Hanover Political Police observed that Waldow, who in 1933 had

⁴⁵ See Orlow, *History of the Nazi Party*, vol. 2; Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship: The Origins, Structure, and Effects of National Socialism*, trans. Jean Steinberg (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973); Martin Broszat, *Der Staat Hitlers: Grundlegung und Entwicklung seiner inneren Verfassung* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1969); Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Arnold, 1993) and *Hitler. 1936-1945: Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); Edward N. Peterson, *The Limits of Hitler's Power*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Lothar Gruchmann, "Die 'Reichsregierung' im Führerstaat: Stellung und funktion des Kabinetts im nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssystem," in *Klassenjustiz und Pluralismus*, eds. Günther Mack-Doeker and Winfried Steffani (Hamburg: n.p., 1973); Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitlers Herrschaft: Vollzug einer Weltanschauung* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1986); and Hans Mommsen, "Hitlers Stellung im nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssystem" in *Der "Führerstaat": Mythos und Realität. Studien zur Struktur und Politik des Dritten Reiches*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981).

⁴⁶ See chapter three in Orlow, *History of the Nazi Party*, vol. 2, 111-192.

chastised the Tannenbergbund *Bundesleitung* for not supporting the Nazi regime, approved of the NSDAP government even as he supported Ludendorff in religious matters. They also reported that Goetze had been slowly moving closer to the Nazi movement. Because of the disagreement between Goetze, Waldow, Ludendorff, and the local Tannenbergers, the Hanover Political Police predicted that a schism between north Germany and south Germany could develop among the remnants of the Tannenbergbund.⁴⁷

Both Waldow and Goetze had made enormous contributions to the movement, but Ludendorff appeared more concerned with their insubordination than with their former success. In the beginning of 1934 Waldow, in a conversation with Ludendorff activists August Lindner and Rudiger von der Gölitz, complained that Ludendorff had separated himself from the movement and had stopped listening to his friends.⁴⁸ That spring Waldow abandoned Ludendorff and became an SS *Standartenführer* in Hanover, a move that critically weakened what was left of the Tannenbergbund in northern Germany. Perhaps this is why Karl von Unruh told Holtzmann that since the movement had fractured irreparably it would be pointless to reinstate the Tannenbergbund once the regime lifted sanctions against it.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Monthly report for April 1934 from Gestapo Hanover, May 4, 1934. Klaus Mlynek, ed., *Gestapo Hannover meldet . . . Polizei- und Regierungsberichte für das mittlere und südliche Niedersachsen zwischen 1933 und 1937* (Hildesheim: Verlag August Lax, 1986), 131-32.

⁴⁸ Conversation between Waldow and August Lindner, January 17, 1934. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 154.

⁴⁹ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, May 2, 1934, BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 10, 55.

Despite the devastating defection of *Landesführer* Waldow, Ludendorff's propagandists continued their activity. The same Hanover Political Police office, which predicted in May 1934 the demise of the Tannenbergbund, reported in June of the same year that Ludendorff's supporters had become more active. The police also noted that a new organization had emerged, the Legal Defense Union for Non-Christian Germans (*Rechtsschutzverband für Deutsche nicht-christlichen Glaubens*), and assumed that it was connected with the Ludendorff movement,⁵⁰ although it is unclear whether the two organizations were related. The regime found it difficult to control the amorphous character of the Ludendorff movement. When it prohibited the more political of Ludendorff's publications, other publications, less political and more spiritual, replaced them. This development, a pragmatic response to restrictions, reflected Ludendorff's continued shift toward emphasizing the intellectual activism of the Ludendorff Press. His agents and lecturers, determined to reach as wide an audience as possible, fanned out across Germany spreading the gospel of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*.

For unsympathetic police and Nazi officials, the Ludendorff movement had not faded away as expected but had returned in an atomized form which refrained from overt political commentary. In the month before the Röhm Purge, the Political Police in Hanover reported that booksellers openly advertised for *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft* and that Frank, feverishly writing letters to other Ludendorff supporters, had been exceptionally busy trying to resurrect the movement. Hanover Political Police also reported that *Bundesführer* Schellendorff told Frank, "The seeds are sown and the fruit

⁵⁰ Monthly report for May 1934 from Gestapo Hanover, June 4, 1934. Mlynec, *Gestapo Hannover*, 151.

grows unhindered. . . . We are not far from great success.” The Political Police suspected that the Ludendorff movement had begun to reorganize itself and prudently decided that the Political Police should observe lectures sponsored by the Ludendorff Press.⁵¹ Faced with the shapeless structure of Ludendorff’s movement and, in some quarters, lackluster support for enforcing regulations, the NSDAP was unable to control Ludendorff effectively.

Curbing the Ludendorff Press

When the NSDAP eliminated Röhm’s SA on June 30, 1934, the SS attacked a small number of Ludendorff’s supporters, notably owners of bookstores that distributed Ludendorff publications. It is unlikely, however, that Ludendorff’s movement was specifically marked for reprisal; it is likely that either the owners of the bookstores fraternized with the SA or SA men frequently gathered in the bookstores. Ludendorff reported to Holtzmann that during the purge somebody destroyed a bookstore in Oberhausen. It is unclear whether Ludendorff understood the Nazi operation against the SA, for he misread Nazi intentions and ominously warned Holtzmann, “Rome believes that its time is at hand,” since he suspected that Catholics used the NSDAP to eliminate radical anti-Catholics in the SA.⁵²

The regime pressed Ludendorff’s supporters in the months following the action. It became obvious that the regime had become less tolerant of radical nationalist activism

⁵¹ Monthly report for June 1934 from Gestapo Hanover, July 4, 1934. Ibid., 170.

⁵² Ludendorff to Holtzmann, July 4, 1934. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 10, 81.

unsanctioned by the Nazi regime, although no regulations reflecting the broad change in policy existed. On July 25, the Bavarian Political Police notified all police departments, state police administrators, district governors, city commissars, and local governments that since Ludendorff's "*Deutsche Gotterkenntnis Society*" was the successor organization to the prohibited Tannenbergbund, had the same goals as the banned organization, and consisted of its former members, it violated the February 28, 1933 Decree for the Protection of People and State.⁵³ Enforcement of the new decree proved haphazard and it was still possible to obtain Ludendorff's publications. Nevertheless, the Osnabrück Political Police reported that Ludendorff's supporters appeared to have lost all coordination and had greatly curtailed their activities. They also had difficulty recruiting new members and convincing people to attend their lectures. One organizer could sell only five tickets to one of Kurth's lectures.⁵⁴ Perhaps the decline in activity was a result of the purge of June 30.

Local police, regional authorities, and the Political Police, however, remained unsure how to interpret the wishes of the Nazi regime. Local officials and police, in order to make their jobs easier and avoid misunderstandings, wanted the Nazi authorities in Berlin to delineate clearly the permitted and forbidden activities of the Ludendorff Press. Some local officials preferred an outright ban on all activity by Ludendorff's movement

⁵³ Order B.Nr. 28907/34 I 1B from Gestapo Bavaria, July 25, 1934. BHStA, Reichsstatthalter Epp, no. 421, fiche 1.

⁵⁴ Monthly report for July 1934 from Gestapo Osnabrück, August 2, 1934. Gerd Steinwascher, ed. *Gestapo Osnabrück meldet . . . Polizei- und Regierungsberichte aus dem Regierungsbezirk Osnabrück aus den Jahren 1933 bis 1936* (Osnabrück: Selbstverlag des Vereins für Geschichte und Landeskunde von Osnabrück, 1995), 80-82.

simply because such a ban would eliminate confusion and standardize policy throughout the country. Most recognized that Ludendorff Press activity was merely disguised Tannenbergbund activism. As the district governor of Hildesheim complained to Frick: "Especially for prison authorities, it is not always easy to distinguish the difference between the forbidden political activity of the former Tannenbergbund and the advertisement and distribution of publications from the Ludendorff Press. Absolute prohibition, which could hardly strengthen the Ludendorff movement in German cultural life, may produce a clearer relationship [between its political activity and its publications]." ⁵⁵ The Political Police in Hanover had reached the same conclusion and worried that former Tannenbergbund members maintained their contacts with each other by attending Ludendorff's spiritual lectures and reading his pamphlets. ⁵⁶

Ludendorff denied that he had a political agenda behind the continued distribution of his pamphlets. He wrote Holtzmann, "I have appealed to those who named me in certain cases, and who said that the organization operated in a political manner. . . . Face-to-face I begged the authorities to take this view: the booksellers are purely businessmen and have no political function." ⁵⁷ His claim that his booksellers were apolitical may have been a lie. In August 1934, the Political Police in Hanover uncovered a conspiracy to disseminate Ludendorff's publications within the NSDAP. It is unclear whether

⁵⁵ Monthly report for July 1934 from the district governor of Hildesheim. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 199.

⁵⁶ Monthly report for August 1934 from Gestapo Hanover, September 4, 1934. *Ibid.*, 205-206.

⁵⁷ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, August 18, 1934. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 10, 85.

Ludendorff was aware of this scheme, but it is clear that some local Ludendorff agents had tried to broaden Ludendorff's influence within the NSDAP itself. The Political Police in Hanover reported that although the region remained quiet, an inspection of one agent, Alwin Bätz of Bad Lauterberg, revealed that he planned to advertise Ludendorff's publications and lectures within NSDAP organizations, starting with the Hitler Youth, expanding to the newly reorganized SA, and then entering the SA Reserve (*Sturmabteilungsreserve*, or SAR) and the NSBO.⁵⁸ This incident could very well have been an isolated case, but it indicates that since no comprehensive and consistently enforced ban on Ludendorff's activities existed, a handful of diligent Ludendorff supporters could infiltrate and influence local NSDAP organization. The police believed it possible that Ludendorff agents were capable of such a campaign.

In order to preclude this danger, the district governor of Hanover suggested on October 9, 1934 that since the regime already prohibited the Tannenbergbund the Reich Interior Minister should ban all Ludendorff publications and bookstores.⁵⁹ A few days later, however, the Gestapo further obfuscated matters when it issued the following instructions to the Political Police throughout Germany:

In order to eliminate confusion arising from lectures held by agents of the Ludendorff Press, you are informed that there are no fundamental objections to lectures of a philosophical nature. The name "Ludendorff" may not be mentioned in the phrasing of the topic. On the other hand, mention of General Ludendorff's name, as well as Frau Dr. Mathilde Ludendorff's name, is allowed in the lecture if it is factually necessary.

⁵⁸ Monthly report for August 1934 from Gestapo Hanover, September 4, 1934. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 205-206.

⁵⁹ Monthly report for September 1934 from the district governor of Hanover, October 9, 1934. *Ibid.*, 238.

All organized lectures are to be observed and incoming reports are to be sent here immediately. Prohibiting or breaking up a gathering should occur only when public security and order are, in fact, in danger, or when the lecturers attack the state. Previously issued standing instructions are hereby invalid.⁶⁰

This new policy was nearly identical to a policy devised by Himmler and Kurth the previous May,⁶¹ but it is unclear why Himmler waited five months before unveiling it.

More confusion occurred in January 1935 when the *Reichsleitung* of the NSDAP notified Frank that it would permit the German press to mention Ludendorff's military studies but not his other works. Frank, frustrated, fell back on the former strategy of the Ludendorff Press, telling business agents in Lower Saxony that they must increase their efforts to get to know their local officials and convince them of the benign nature of Ludendorff's propaganda.⁶²

Dialogue with the Reichswehr

As the Nazi regime struggled to formulate a coherent policy controlling Ludendorff's agitation, he sought to distribute his publications throughout the military. On April 9, 1935, Ludendorff would have his seventieth birthday, and he and Holtzmann believed that the celebration would serve as a good opportunity to make peace with both

⁶⁰ Text taken from Order Nr. IIe/1715/41 from Gestapo Württemberg repeating the orders from Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, October 12, 1934. IfZ, Fa 119/1 (Bayerische Politische Polizei), 63.

⁶¹ Circular no. 9 from Frank to Ludendorff Press agents, May 29, 1934. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 63.

⁶² Circular no. 22 from Frank to Ludendorff Press agents in Lower Saxony, January 28, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 63.

the Reichswehr and the Nazi regime. They also hoped that a successful celebration would lead to the lifting of restrictions on his movement. With an astonishing lack of foresight, however, and through a series of tactical errors, Ludendorff harmed his chances of reaching an understanding with both the Nazi regime and the military.

Holtzmann had earlier discussed with the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Werner von Fritsch, the possibility of some sort of official meeting between Ludendorff and the military. In June 1934, he had hoped to convince the army to honor Ludendorff at a celebration scheduled for the end of August, the twentieth anniversary of his capture of Liège. Fritsch indicated that the army would have liked to honor Ludendorff but worried about the political consequences of the celebration.⁶³ After the Röhm Purge Fritsch, claiming that he was “too busy,” told Holtzmann that he could no longer speak with him about the matter.⁶⁴ Undeterred, throughout the rest of 1934 Holtzmann met frequently with the leadership of the General Staff, especially Chief of the General Staff General Ludwig Beck and Defense Minister General Werner von Blomberg, as well as other Reichswehr officers.

The conversations between Holtzmann and the Reichswehr proved fruitful. After a series of informal meetings, in December 1934 the General Staff decided to meet formally with Ludendorff in Munich in January. The Reichswehr intended the meeting to be the first step in healing the wounds inflicted by years of feuding between Ludendorff

⁶³ Werner von Fritsch to Holtzmann, June 11, 1934. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 6-7.

⁶⁴ Fritsch to Holtzmann, July 7, 1934. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 6-7.

and Hindenburg. More meetings would follow. The main point on the first meeting's agenda concerned the writing of a new official Reichswehr history of the Battle of Tannenberg. Ludendorff had learned that the Propaganda Ministry had decided to confiscate his books on the battle, presumably because they tended to criticize Hindenburg harshly. Upset that the Reichswehr continued to endorse a history of the Battle of Tannenberg that denigrated his role in the victory while elevating Hindenburg's contributions, Ludendorff demanded that the Reichswehr explain why it subordinated itself to the Propaganda Ministry.⁶⁵ On January 6, 1935, two Reichswehr representatives, General Beck and retired General Georg Wetzell, Ludendorff's Chief of Operations during World War I, met with Ludendorff in Tutzing to discuss a new history of the battle and a possible birthday celebration for Ludendorff in April.

Conversation at this, and subsequent meetings, became personal. Ludendorff rarely stuck with the agendas of the meetings and used them to advance his anti-Christian agenda. It was difficult for the representatives of the General Staff to talk with Ludendorff and his representatives without discussing his nationalist and spiritual goals as well as the Nazi regime's censorship of his activities. In the meeting of January 6, he spoke at length about *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*. Complaining that the military rarely accepted, and often hindered, soldiers who believed in the old Germanic gods (*Deutsch-Gottgläubige*), he expected Holtzmann to bring up the issue of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*

⁶⁵ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, December 24, 1934. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 31.

at his next meeting with representatives of the General Staff.⁶⁶ “A professional army,” he wrote to Holtzmann, “can keep at a distance such a powerful movement as today’s believers in Germanic gods. A people’s army must take them into account once it completely serves *völkisch* and state interests.”⁶⁷ Ludendorff openly advocated a people’s army, which would not necessarily reflect the values of the professional, conservative, and aristocratic military men of the General Staff, many of whom took offense at Ludendorff’s anti-Christian ideology.

The Reichswehr leaders, fully recognizing the political difficulty inherent in meeting with Ludendorff, tried to accommodate him and his eccentricities. However, the Reichswehr leadership also admitted that after Hindenburg’s death in August 1934 it had changed its attitude toward Ludendorff.⁶⁸ At the meeting of January 6 Wetzell said that Ludendorff and the Reichswehr essentially had the same goals.⁶⁹ Wetzell meant that both Ludendorff and the Reichswehr wanted Germany to rearm immediately. Wetzell also stated that he “believed this great German man and soldier Ludendorff will show, with calm appreciation, more understanding for the aim and stated intention of our visit and that of the Defense Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Army: to reestablish the old

⁶⁶ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, January 23, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 61.

⁶⁷ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, January 23, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 62.

⁶⁸ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, January 1935? BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 32-33.

⁶⁹ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, January 14, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 23.

bond of solidarity between the Warlord of the World War and the Wehrmacht.”⁷⁰ The representatives also read a letter of greeting to Ludendorff from Hitler, who requested a meeting with Ludendorff. Ludendorff refused, citing as his reason the Nazi restriction of his freedom.⁷¹

Since no other records of the meeting of January 6 have emerged, it is unclear what exactly happened on that day in Tutzing. It is also unclear what plans the Reichswehr had for Ludendorff. It is clear, however, that the Reichswehr had no intention to recruit Ludendorff for an anti-Nazi putsch. The officers of the General Staff took seriously their oath of allegiance to Hitler when, in August 1934, he became president after Hindenburg’s death. The German military had more important concerns than to appease Ludendorff, for it was preoccupied with rearming. Ludendorff would have made an unreliable ally, and his unseemly quarrel with Hindenburg still troubled many officers in the Reichswehr. It also appears that the Reichswehr never intended to ask Ludendorff to lend his logistical expertise in the rearming and reorganization of the army. In 1953, retired Colonel General Franz Halder, Beck’s successor as Chief of the General Staff, and retired Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, Chief of Operations under Beck in 1935, told Lindner that they had never heard of any intention to include Ludendorff in any reorganization or rearmament plans.⁷² Furthermore, in February 1935

⁷⁰ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, January 14, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 23.

⁷¹ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, January 1935? BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 34.

⁷² Franz Halder to Lindner, March 6, 1953; Erich von Manstein to Lindner, April 17, 1953. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 55.

Beck told Holtzmann that he had no time for Ludendorff because he was too busy rebuilding the Reichswehr. He did not mind if Ludendorff wanted to discuss military matters with him, but he found it unfortunate that Ludendorff seemed only concerned with *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*.⁷³

Complicating the delicate negotiations between Ludendorff and the military, a pamphlet titled *A Tragedy in Three Acts and an Intermission (Ein Trauerspiel in 3 Aufzügen und einem Zwischenspiel)*, which attacked the deceased Hindenburg, circulated throughout Germany in February 1935. The scandal exposed the weakness of the regime's policy toward Ludendorff. It was significant, the Political Police in Hanover noted, that some agents had even sent pamphlets directly to police officials. One agent willingly gave a list of subscribers to local police when they came to search for Ludendorff's pamphlet. The report also mentioned that the police appeared unenthusiastic about their task.⁷⁴ Frustrated that they could not halt this perfidious activity since they were unsure of the regulations, the Hanover Political Police complained to Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, arguing that

The distributors are sales representatives of the Ludendorff Press and have been found to be former members of the prohibited Tannenbergbund. It is extremely difficult for an administrator supervising subordinate officers to distinguish between the prohibited activity of the disbanded Tannenbergbund and the permitted business activity of the Ludendorff Press. The representatives of this publisher are the same people as the

⁷³ Conversation between Holtzmann and Ludwig Beck, February 23, 1935. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 55.

⁷⁴ Unidentified Ludendorff supporter in Derenburg to Anne Frank, February 8, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 57.

members and functionaries of the former Tannenbergbund. Forming a clearer relationship in this area seems necessary.⁷⁵

In fact, Ludendorff, demanding that the anti-Hindenburg pamphlet find its way to the smallest villages in the country, had himself instructed his agents to distribute it aggressively.⁷⁶ The Reichswehr rightly suspected that Ludendorff, upon Hindenburg's death, had initiated the smear against his former partner in his campaign to downplay Hindenburg's role in the German victory at Tannenberg. Nevertheless, in February the Ludendorff Press notified its general distributors that the Defense Ministry, which blamed the dispute on the German press, had decided to accept Ludendorff's interpretation of the Battle of Tannenberg.⁷⁷ Although they officially accepted Ludendorff's interpretation of history, many Reichswehr generals found his behavior shameful.

Opportunities squandered again: Ludendorff's seventieth birthday

Ludendorff blamed the Reichswehr's coolness on its dislike for his wife, but he believed nonetheless that the negotiations concerning his birthday celebration were continuing smoothly. Holtzmann expected a widespread celebration across the country in Ludendorff's honor but warned organizers that they should register beforehand with the

⁷⁵ Monthly report for January 1935 from Gestapo Hanover, February 5, 1935. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 297.

⁷⁶ Anne Frank to her husband Herbert Frank, January 22, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 57.

⁷⁷ Ludendorff Press to all general distributors, February 18, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 61.

local police, and if they faced opposition, they should contact him so he could negotiate with the relevant authorities.⁷⁸ Learning that Holtzmann planned to meet Himmler, Ludendorff asked Holtzmann to downplay the recent pamphlet attacking Hindenburg and insist that he was not responsible for it.⁷⁹ Ludendorff's statement was a blatant lie since he himself had ordered its widespread distribution. Even if the Nazi regime, the Reichswehr, and the Ludendorff movement could coordinate any of their attempts to reach an understanding with each other, Ludendorff did not have the desire to negotiate in good faith.

All parties involved in the upcoming celebration had their own specific interests in honoring Ludendorff. German nationalists had become more confident: the Saarland voted to return to Germany in January 1935 and Hitler appeared ready to reinstate universal conscription. Ludendorff's admirers expected his seventieth birthday celebration to highlight his heroic role in World War I and demonstrate Germany's newfound self-assurance. The Reichswehr expected the celebration to highlight its rearmament program, while the Nazi regime expected the celebration to cement the alliance between the military and National Socialism.

The Political Police in Hanover and Osnabrück reported that lectures sponsored by Ludendorff Press had become more frequent and widespread. In February 1935, three

⁷⁸ Holtzmann to Frank, February 22, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 57.

⁷⁹ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, February 4, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 97.

hundred people attended a lecture in Osnabrück,⁸⁰ and Rudolf Schmidt, a particularly industrious Ludendorff lecturer, spoke in Hanover before seven hundred people in one hall and two hundred people at smaller location. The Political Police in Hanover reported that members of the Tannenbergbund, Otto Strasser's outlawed Schwarze Front, the DSP, and the NSDAP, as well as younger Germans and many women, attended these lectures.⁸¹ Ludendorff's supporters stepped up activities in the countryside even as local police, following prior instructions, confiscated their advertisements for lectures and publications. Local police in Wittlage near Osnabrück reported that a local farmer had issued invitations to an upcoming lecture and distributed propaganda for *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft*. In this particular instance, the authorities, according to their interpretation of regulations, had to curtail his agitation. Otherwise, lectures in the region continued.⁸²

Ludendorff also continued his effort to build support within the army. At the beginning of March 1935, Holtzmann met regularly with Reichswehr representatives, notably Beck. Expressing concern that the military discouraged open empathy for Ludendorff, Holtzmann demanded that the Reichswehr halt oppression of Ludendorff's ideological advocates among military personnel, for he believed that more than a few officers sympathized with Ludendorff's ideology. The Reichswehr leadership, especially

⁸⁰ Monthly report for February 1935 from Gestapo Osnabrück, March 7, 1935. Steinwascher, *Gestapo Osnabrück*, 138.

⁸¹ Monthly report for February 1935 from Gestapo Hanover, March 4, 1935. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 319.

⁸² Report from Wittlage local police, March 19, 1935. Steinwascher, *Gestapo Osnabrück*, 463.

worried about Ludendorff's reputation as an opponent of the Nazi state, appeared more concerned about its relationship with the Nazi regime, since it, like local Political Police and administrators, as well as Ludendorff's supporters, was unsure of the NSDAP's position on Ludendorff.⁸³ Holtzmann tried his best to soothe their fears, but he realized that the Reichswehr, worried about Nazi disapproval, still did not trust Ludendorff entirely and preferred to curb his partisans in the military. Ludendorff interpreted the Reichswehr's lack of enthusiasm for *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* as evidence of a conspiracy against him;⁸⁴ he failed to realize that the Reichswehr General Staff found itself in a delicate situation. It was struggling to define its relationship with the regime and too close a relationship with Ludendorff could arouse Nazi suspicions.⁸⁵ Ultimately, the military really had no need for Ludendorff, although as it rearmed, reorganized, and retrained, it might have benefited from his expertise in organization and logistics. The political dangers of building a closer relationship with Ludendorff, however, were too great for the military. Only Holtzmann's tenacious badgering on his patron's behalf kept the Reichswehr from terminating their conversation with Ludendorff.

At the end of March 1935, as all three players in the discussions toiled to reach an understanding before Ludendorff's birthday celebration, the regime revealed to the

⁸³ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, March 11, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 153.

⁸⁴ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, March 12, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 159.

⁸⁵ For extensive scholarly analyses of the German military during the Third Reich, see the essays in Rolf-Dieter Müller and Hans-Erich Volkmann, eds., *Die Wehrmacht. Mythos und Realität* (Munich: Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamtes, 1999).

German public the conversations between the former military dictator of Germany and the Nazi regime. All sorts of speculation emerged. The German press printed numerous articles on recent developments in the negotiations, which quickly piqued the interest of the foreign press. Rumors concerning the upcoming celebration circulated inside and outside Germany, so much so that the Reich Press Office declared that the German press could only write about the upcoming birthday festivities, not about negotiations between Ludendorff and the military.⁸⁶ On March 15, 1935, the *Jornal da Manhã*, of Rio de Janeiro, reported that the entire German press spoke of reconciliation between the “greatest soldier of the World War” and the Führer, and surmised that Hitler, by glorifying Ludendorff, would ensure his position as leader of the German people.⁸⁷ *The New York American* predicted that Ludendorff would be “elevated to the rank of field-marshal . . . as a prelude to his return to active participation in the Reichswehr’s affairs.”⁸⁸

Ludendorff’s fortunes had improved despite recent setbacks. On March 17, 1935, Heroes’ Memorial Day, the day honoring fallen German soldiers, Blomberg said in his address at the State Opera House in Berlin that “we commemorate the man who, from glorious beginnings at Tannenberg, who stood by Hindenburg’s side through the heroic events of the war - the man who, like Atlas, carries the world on his shoulders: we bow before the warlord Ludendorff.” The German press published the text of the speech on

⁸⁶ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, March 26, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 191.

⁸⁷ *Jornal de Manhã*, March 15, 1935. BA, Zsg. 117/1046 (HdN).

⁸⁸ *The New York American*, April 8, 1935. BA, Zsg. 117/1046 (HdN).

April 9, Ludendorff's birthday.⁸⁹ The day after Blomberg's address Himmler suggested to the chief of the Main Security Office (*Sicherheitshauptamt*) that it should remove from security questionnaires references to Ludendorff's name, the Tannenbergbund, and other anti-Christian movements, thereby erasing the stigma associated with Ludendorff.⁹⁰ It appeared that Ludendorff was on his way to rehabilitation.

Yet he was dissatisfied. In a letter to Holtzmann, he complained that the regime still prohibited his cultural organization and its publication *Deutschvolk*. He admitted that he understood why the NSDAP prohibited the Tannenbergbund and his newspaper *Ludendorffs Volkswarte* since some could construe the organization and the publication as political, but he insisted that the *Deutschvolk* differed from his other publications since it discussed only *weltanschaulich* and spiritual questions. To forbid this organization was, in his eyes, an example of "outrageous distrust."⁹¹ This was certainly not the case, for the NSDAP had proven itself reasonably willing to accommodate the general as long as he refrained from outwardly criticizing the regime and disrupting society with his propaganda. Indeed, on the same day that Ludendorff complained to Holtzmann, and one week after Himmler decided to eliminate the stigma attached to the Ludendorff movement, Deputy Führer Heß issued to the NSDAP a rambling decree stating:

⁸⁹ *Berliner Tageblatt*, April 9, 1935. BA, Zsg. 117/1046 (HdN).

⁹⁰ Order Tgb.Nr. AR/1099 Geh. from Himmler to the chief of the Main Security Office, March 18, 1935. IfZ, MA-744 (HdN), no. 1246, Personalsachen (Ludendorff, Erich).

⁹¹ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, March 20, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 179.

The creators of the new German Reich's victorious National Socialist *Weltanschauung* renounce acts of revenge on former opponents as long as they abstain from disrupting our constructive work and do not fight, either openly or secretly, against the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* and the developing National Socialist state.

There also exists no motive for General Ludendorff, who abandoned his political struggle against the new state after the successful disbanding of the Tannenbergbund on September 23, 1933, to continue personal attacks in meetings or in the press.

Ludendorff the politician goes another way than we, even though Ludendorff the general and warlord, because of his immortal merits during the World War, can claim the respect and gratitude of all German people.

Consequently, the obvious duty for every National Socialist is to ignore, in a chivalrous manner, the disparaging attacks that General Ludendorff personally directs against us in his continuing *weltanschaulichen* struggle against our *Weltanschauung*.

Attacks by his nearly hopeless supporters, however, will, as before, be taken up promptly by the party, so long as the nature and manner of these attacks does not fall under the jurisdiction of state authorities.⁹²

Heß had admitted that the Nazi regime would do nothing against Ludendorff's movement as long as it did not destabilize the state, but stated that it would punish Ludendorff's supporters. His threat proved empty. The next week Himmler asked Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Bavarian Political Police and commander of the SD, to permit Ludendorff Press-sponsored lectures in Bavaria.⁹³

There was no apparent contradiction between Heß's and Himmler's orders as long as Ludendorff activists refrained from attacking the regime. Once they did attack the regime, however, local administrators found the relevant regulations unclear since it was difficult to determine which authority had jurisdiction over the infraction. In either case,

⁹² General Order 45/35 from Heß, March 20, 1935. NA, file T581 (HdN) folder 1246, roll 53 (Verschiedenes).

⁹³ Order Tgb.Nr. AR 365 from Himmler to Reinhard Heydrich, March 26, 1935. IfZ, MA-452, Records of the Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police (Hoover Institute T175, roll 26), RFSS/Pers. Stab (V).

Ludendorff still believed that the NSDAP continued to oppress him, which was certainly not true: Heß had requested party members to treat him with respect despite his differences with the NSDAP, Himmler had lifted restrictions on past Ludendorff activists who wished to join the party, and Heydrich had allowed Ludendorff activists to agitate openly in Bavaria. Yet Ludendorff rejected the Nazi regime's conciliatory gestures. He insisted that if the NSDAP wished reconciliation, the party must accept everything for which he and his wife stood, or it would get no cooperation.⁹⁴ Ludendorff could not have been more mistaken in his assessment of his situation in Germany

Perhaps because of his intransigence, his birthday celebration on April 9, 1935 was not as successful as Ludendorff had hoped. Hitler did not meet him personally and the Reichswehr organized only a small parade with an honor guard and military band. In 1953, Wilhelm Brückner, Hitler's adjutant, told Lindner that Hitler had planned to meet with Ludendorff but canceled the engagement when he learned that Mathilde Ludendorff would be present. Brückner added that Hitler did not hate her, but simply could not stand her. She, in Hitler's opinion, "got on people's nerves." Hitler later claimed that he preferred to let the Reichswehr leadership act as negotiators, although he insisted on the right to participate in discussions.⁹⁵

At Ludendorff's house in Tutzing, Generals Beck, Blomberg, and Fritsch met with Ludendorff for breakfast but no one engaged in serious conversation. Beck later

⁹⁴ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, March 27, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 197.

⁹⁵ Wilhelm Brückner to Lindner, November 2, 1953. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 63-64.

broadcast a bland speech highlighting Ludendorff's military career, and Goebbels sent a congratulatory telegram. The meeting was uneventful. It appears that both the Reichswehr and NSDAP were having second thoughts. That month some Ludendorff agents complained that local officials stalled their applications for licenses⁹⁶ and some authorities forbade celebrations of Ludendorff's birthday.⁹⁷ Others permitted celebrations under the strict orders that the participants mention neither Ludendorff's feud with Hindenburg nor his differences with the NSDAP.⁹⁸ Local officials justified their decisions by claiming that the celebrations held in Ludendorff's honor could lead to unrest. Their fears were justified, for in some instances public disturbances surrounding Ludendorff's lectures had occurred. Faced with growing Catholic concern about the general growth in neopagan activity, the Nazi regime was forced to rethink its recent tolerance of Ludendorff's movement.

Ludendorff also faced opposition from some of his supporters. A portion of his movement remained fervently anti-Nazi and disapproved of his negotiations with the Nazi regime. As a result, he had to suppress dissent within his own ranks. At the end of April, Walter Löhde of the Ludendorff Press said that "too much has been said of [Ludendorff's] relationship with Hitler" and that "nonsense has been spread about, and it

⁹⁶ Otto Böhmeleit to Frank, March 28, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 56.

⁹⁷ Frank to Holtzmann, April 4, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 56; The mayor of Hersfeld to Frank, April 9, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 57.

⁹⁸ Paul Ruth to Frank, April 13, 1935, IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 57.

must be stopped.⁹⁹ Ludendorff then told Holtzmann that he must dispel the rumors that he refused to meet with Hitler.¹⁰⁰ Ludendorff wanted to make it clear that Hitler had refused to meet with him.

The party leadership as well as the Nazi state reacted hesitantly, inconsistently, and inefficiently to Ludendorff's agitation. Because of the weakness of NSDAP authority at the lowest levels of state administration and because of conflicting interests within the party itself, the Nazi regime found it nearly impossible to forge a consistent strategy to halt Ludendorff's agitation. Furthermore, many Nazis sympathized with Ludendorff and agreed, in principle, with his *völkisch* philosophy. The contradictions in Nazi policy concerning Ludendorff became more acute because Nazis at all levels of the party, some of whom were active in Ludendorff's political organizations before they joined the NSDAP, continued to admire Ludendorff greatly, if not his political and spiritual activism. The enthusiasm of Ludendorff's supporters concerned the NSDAP leaders, who feared that his supporters could unleash a wave of uncontrollable radical agitation, in some instances within the party itself, which would either undermine support for the regime among moderate Germans or give rise to complaints within the regime that it was not radical enough. After 1934, the NSDAP leadership gained control over radicals within the party, but it still had to heed public opinion. The Nazi regime between 1933 and 1935 had to walk a fine line. Because of his enormous stature as a nationalist

⁹⁹ Walter Löhde to Ludendorff Press general agents, April 24, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, April 25, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 231.

and because his *völkisch* ideology was similar to the Nazis' *Weltanschauung*, the regime was unwilling to silence Ludendorff completely. However, it could not allow him to continue his agitation for fear of endangering stability. Only Ludendorff's death would resolve this peculiar problem facing the regime.

Chapter 4

Reconciliation between Ludendorff and the Nazi Regime, 1935-1937

By shredding the disgraceful Treaty of Versailles and by rearming the German people, in defiance of all internal and external political opposition and economic obstacles, the awakening *völkisch* will to live has climaxed with Adolf Hitler - whom we thank on his birthday, April 20, 1937. This is a tremendous, internationally important event.¹

-- *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft*, April 20, 1937

I believe that Haus Ludendorff, having destroyed itself, is finished. Earlier someone said that Frau Ludendorff is the "supranational commitment" whose purpose is to finish off this man. Upon hearing this comment, I completely gave myself up to laughter.²

-- Joachim Schwenke to Robert Holtzmann, November 24, 1936

It seems to me that nothing would be more foolish than to re-establish the worship of Wotan. Our old mythology had ceased to be viable when Christianity implanted itself.³

-- Adolf Hitler, October 14, 1941

¹ *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft*, April 20, 1937, 52. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 18, 56.

² Joachim Schwenke to Holtzmann, November 24, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 17, 110.

³ *Hitler's Secret Conversations*, 51.

In early 1935, some Nazi authorities realized that when the regime did nothing to halt the agitation of Ludendorff activists and other neopagans, support for the regime diminished in Catholic regions of Germany, especially in the lower Rhine valley. German Catholics were right to be alarmed. In the middle of 1935 the Nazi regime pressured the Catholic Church in Germany to accept the unconditional authority of the party. Also in 1935, the German Christian Movement (*Deutsche Christen*), with the aid of the Nazi regime, had become stronger in Germany. The German Faith Movement became more visible and grew rapidly in the first half of the year, a development that indirectly aided Ludendorff's movement. In general, the regime tolerated the anti-Christian agitation of the neopagans when it served the purposes of Nazism.

Ludendorff, completely independent of the regime, also sought to convince the Army High Command to accept his ideology into the body of the rapidly expanding Wehrmacht. To some extent the military gave him sanctuary as well. He wished to transform the *Weltanschauung* of the army into a unified, *völkisch*, anti-Christian *mentalité*. His task was not terribly difficult, for remnants of his pan-German nationalism and proto-totalitarian doctrine from World War I still existed within the upper echelons of the German army. The military leadership proved receptive to radical nationalist ideology,⁴ yet he did face token opposition, for some officers despised his anti-Christian ideology and resisted his attempt to remove Christianity from military life.

⁴ See Walter Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff, 1657-1945*, trans. Brain Battershaw (New York: Praeger, 1961), 148-49. For recent histories of the Wehrmacht during the Third Reich, see also Manfred Messerschmidt, "Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat," in *Deutschland 1933-1945. Neue Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft*, ed. Karl Dietrich Bracher, Manfred Funke, and Hans-Adolf Jacobson (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag GmbH, 1992), 377-403; Hans-Erich Volkmann, "Von

At the end of 1935 it appeared that Christianity suffered from assaults on all sides: from neopagan groups like the German Faith Movement and *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*, from the Nazi regime, and from groups who wished to merge National Socialist and *völkisch* ideology with Christianity. When anti-Catholic groups threatened to destabilize German society, the Nazi regime compelled Ludendorff and his competitors in the German Faith Movement to halt their agitation. As in the past, Nazi restrictions were ineffective. Ludendorff, however, had begun to change his opinion of Nazism. By spring 1937 he realized that Hitler and Nazism were firmly in control of Germany, so he accepted Hitler's offer of reconciliation. With Ludendorff formally allied with Nazism, Hitler finally achieved his goal to unify radical German nationalism under the Nazi banner. By this time Ludendorff's movement was more a nuisance than a threat to the regime. Key supporters, of which Frank and Holtzmann were two, abandoned Ludendorff in 1936. His movement was crippled and Hitler gave it sanctuary within Nazism.

Blomberg zu Keitel - Die Wehrmachtführung und die Demontage des Rechtsstaates," in Müller and Volkmann, *Die Wehrmacht*, 47-65; Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Rollen- und Selbstverständnis des Offizierkorps der Wehrmacht im NS-Staat," in Müller and Volkmann, *Die Wehrmacht*, 66-74; Karl-Heinz Janßen, "Politische und militärische Zielvorstellungen der Wehrmachtführung," in Müller and Volkmann, *Die Wehrmacht*, 75-84; Wolfgang Petter, "Militärische Massengesellschaft und Entprofessionalisierung des Offiziers," in Müller and Volkmann, *Die Wehrmacht*, 359-70; and Hans-Ulrich Thamer, "Die Erosion einer Säule. Wehrmacht und NSDAP," in Müller and Volkmann, *Die Wehrmacht*, 420-35.

German neopagan movements and the Nazi regime

The Ludendorff movement, like other neopagan movements, participated in the wider struggle between the Nazi regime and Christianity in Germany, a struggle which hearkened back to the *völkisch* debates in Bavaria during the mid-1920s. Since unification under Bismarck and the *Kulturkampf* of the 1870s, the relationship between religion and the state remained an important question in Germany. According to J. S. Conway, perhaps the Nazi regime wished to divide German spirituality and sow doubt in German minds by encouraging the development of numerous rival sects that attacked Christianity.⁵ With no single religion dominating German life, the Nazis would find it easier to maintain absolute political control since the Nazi *Weltanschauung* would have no unified competition.

In the spring of 1935, neopaganism and German *völkisch* spiritual movements, organizations which were numerically quite small compared to those of established Christian churches, became more visible throughout the country. Interest in Ludendorff's brand of Germanic spirituality grew, perhaps as a result of his increased exposure in the weeks leading up to his birthday on April 9. The Political Police in Osnabrück reported that throughout March and April 1935 the Ludendorff Press sponsored a number of open meetings, all of which enjoyed large attendance. One lecture held in March, titled "Rome, Judea, and Deutsche Gotterkenntnis," drew three hundred people who loudly applauded and cheered the presentation. Two others in April drew between five and six

⁵ Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, 108.

hundred people apiece.⁶ In all cases the authorities found no reason to disperse the gatherings.

The increase in the visibility of the Ludendorff movement coincided with an increase in the visibility of all anti-Christian movements throughout Germany. The German Faith Movement experienced tremendous growth, a development which suggests that a broad range of neopagan movements grew in size and popularity in the first half of 1935. Sopade informants reported that Jakob Wilhelm Hauer's German Faith Movement (*Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*), an anti-Christian movement which rivaled Ludendorff's *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*, had stepped up activity in Saxony. After the Saar plebiscite, Hauer, demanding that German schools teach the tenets of German Faith, initiated a propaganda campaign and membership drive across Germany in February 1935. During the spring of 1935 up to sixty German Faith Movement meetings took place each week throughout Germany. A few rallies are noteworthy. On April 15, one hundred SS men in uniform and a similar number of Hitler Youth constituted a third of the six hundred people attending an open meeting of the German Faith Movement at the New Academy in Munich, where the topic of discussion was "Christian or German?"⁷ On April 26 a gigantic German Faith Movement rally filled the Berlin Sport Palace and included immense emblems and banners, dozens of speakers including Hauer and Reventlow, and

⁶ Monthly report for April 1935 from Gestapo Osnabrück, May 4, 1935. Steinwascher, *Gestapo Osnabrück*, 155-56.

⁷ Monthly report for April 1935 from Munich local police, no date. BHStA, Reichsstatthalter Epp, Nr. 639.

an orchestra.⁸ The attendance figures for this rally are vague, but many thousands certainly participated. It is likely that this is the Berlin rally at which Sopade observers reported a heavy Nazi presence. Perhaps the three thousand SS and SA men in attendance were there to keep the peace, although Sopade informers questioned their intent and their ideological loyalty to the German Faith Movement since the SS and SA men got free beer at the rally.⁹ Ludendorff saw Hauer's movement as a competitor, wondering if the Gestapo, by allowing such nonsense to continue, wanted all Germans to become insane.¹⁰ Hauer's movement proved more popular than *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*, but Ludendorff's movement benefited indirectly from the growth of the German Faith Movement.¹¹

As neopagan activism increased, Catholic opposition to neopaganism increased. In April 1935 the district governor in Aachen reported to Reich Interior Minister Wilhelm Frick that the Catholic citizens of the region distrusted the Nazi regime because it, they believed, tolerated and perhaps even condoned neopagan anti-Christian rhetoric. Many Catholics of Aachen concluded that the NSDAP, along with the Tannenbergbund and the German Faith Movement, had deliberately launched an assault on the Catholic Church.¹²

⁸ Helmreich, *German Churches under Hitler*, 406-407.

⁹ Monthly report for June 1935. *Deutschland-Bericht der Sopade, Zweiter Jahrgang 1935* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Petra Nettelbeck, 1980), 681-82.

¹⁰ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, May 31, 1935. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 27, Mappe 3.

¹¹ Monthly report for February 1935. *Sopade 1935*, 243.

¹² Bernard Vollmer, ed., *Volksopposition im Polizeistaat: Gestapo- und Regierungsbericht 1934-1936* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1957), 192.

They noticed Frick's intimacy with the German Faith Movement, and during the celebration of Ludendorff's seventieth birthday the regime had publicly recognized his accomplishments. Catholics in Aachen had come to associate Ludendorff's well-known anti-Catholic agitation with Nazism. Two months later the district governor suggested to Frick, the Prussian Prime Minister, and the provincial governor of the Rhine Province, that the Nazi regime should not give the impression it supported the activities of the German Faith Movement and the Ludendorff Press. He explained that in many instances the SA and Hitler Youth attended German Faith Movement and Ludendorff Press gatherings not because they sympathized with their message but because they wished to defend the meetings from disturbances; anti-Catholic rhetoric at these meetings could lead to social disruption and create instability in the Hitler Youth and the SA. The district governor expected the Church to defend itself vigorously against this sort of agitation.¹³

Disturbances occurred elsewhere in Germany, suggesting that widespread resistance to neopaganism existed. In May 1935, the local police in *Kreis Wittlage* near Osnabrück reported disorder at one open lecture sponsored by the Ludendorff Press. The speaker argued that once Germans eradicated Judaism in their country, Christianity, since it derived from Judaism, would be eliminated as well. These remarks irritated many in the audience.¹⁴ In Osnabrück four months later, the Political Police reported that although lectures sponsored by the Ludendorff Press enjoyed good attendance, some of those

¹³ The district governor of Aachen to Frick, the Prussian Prime Minister, and the provincial governor of Rhine Province, June 13, 1935. *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁴ Report from Wittlage local police, May 13, 1935. Steinwascher, *Gestapo Osnabrück*, 468.

attending took offense at the anti-Christian rhetoric of the speakers.¹⁵ The Political Police in these regions had become uncomfortable with the Ludendorff movement's freedom of activity and wanted to place greater restrictions on its propaganda and agitation. Perhaps such considerations, as well as the counsel of Nazi administrators closer to the public and better able to judge its mood, weighed on Hitler's mind when, in May 1935, he told Holtzmann that even though he sympathized with Ludendorff, the Church as well as foreign powers would not allow him to lift restrictions on Ludendorff's *Deutschvolk*.¹⁶ He appears to have perceived the situation accurately, for in June 1935 the SPD in exile reported that Catholic dissatisfaction with Nazism had increased.¹⁷

Security forces in Germany also understood the dangers associated with neopaganism. August Heissmeyer, Chief of the SS Main Office (SS-*Hauptamt*), interpreted the increase in neopagan activity, and the increase in Ludendorff's activity in particular, as a struggle of *Weltanschauungen*, much as Heß had concluded in his circular of the previous spring. The SS Main Office consequently forbade SS members to attend such gatherings or belong to any Ludendorff organizations. Furthermore, the SS Main Office ordered the SS to suppress any interference in the conflict between the Church and the regime.¹⁸ Despite Heissmeyer's orders, throughout the summer of 1935 SS men

¹⁵ Monthly report for October 1935 from Gestapo Osnabrück, November 4, 1935. *Ibid.*, 275-76.

¹⁶ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, May 5, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 247.

¹⁷ Monthly report for June 1935. *Sopade 1935*, 681-82.

¹⁸ Order Tgb.Ch 187/35 from August Heissmeyer, Chief of the SS Main Office, SS-Central Chancellery, June 13, 1935. IfZ, MA-387, Records of the Reich Leader of the

continued to attend Ludendorff lectures. This contradiction confused at least one SS officer. A Sopade informer reported meeting an SS man who could not understand why he had to accept the Ludendorff movement when only months previously his superiors had expected him to break it up.¹⁹ If the SS had a national policy concerning neopaganism, it was inconsistent. Not all SS men followed official SS policy.

The upper echelons of Nazi leadership took little action to diminish the unrest. In a widely publicized speech in Bavaria in June 1935, Göring openly applauded neopagan groups and their practices. He continued his campaign against Catholicism throughout July, first issuing to Prussian administrators a circular that attacked political Catholicism and then issuing a decree severely restricting all Christian youth groups, although it did not ban such organizations outright. On July 7 in Münster, Frick insisted that Germany had to rid itself of confessional differences and argued that Catholics must follow the laws of the state, including the controversial Sterilization Law of July 14, 1933. Frick's conclusion hinted that the state could determine Church doctrine in Germany. Although Frick was responsible for religious affairs, he had found it difficult to interest Hitler in questions of state religious policy, so throughout the summer of 1935 Frick acted independently and gradually shifted policy away from accommodating the Catholic and Evangelical churches toward coercing them into submission.²⁰ Morality trials against the clergy began that summer, the sterilization law was amended in June and July, and there

SS and Chief of the German Police (Hoover Institute, file T175, roll 188), SS/Ru SHA, frame 5970.

¹⁹ Monthly report for August 1935. *Sopade 1935*, 950.

²⁰ Helmreich, *German Churches under Hitler*, 272-73.

was a campaign against the confessional schools.²¹ On July 16 Hitler finally entered the debate and created the Ministry for Church Affairs, headed by former Prussian Justice Minister Hanns Kerrl, but this bureaucratic reshuffling did little to improve the situation. In fact, at the local and provincial levels, Kerrl found it hard to restrain the most vigorous anti-Christian Nazis.²² The Propaganda Ministry did not ease Kerrl's burden; between 1935 and 1937 it publicized countless lurid tales describing the immoral behavior of bishops, priests, and other Catholic figures.²³ During this period many Catholic priests and members of Catholic orders were prosecuted for illegal currency transactions, homosexuality, and other offenses.

As the Nazi regime struggled to formulate a consistent policy concerning neopagan movements, Ludendorff, through Holtzmann, continued to petition Nazis in Berlin to lift the restrictions on his freedom. The party bureaucracy stymied Ludendorff's advocate. Edwin Nordmann, an official in the Reich Chancellery, told Holtzmann that he found their discussions informative, but that he was more interested in meeting Mathilde Ludendorff than her husband. Given unfavorable Nazi attitudes toward Ludendorff's wife and rumors about her past, the remark may have been tongue-in-cheek, although it is possible that Nordmann believed that she was the real leader of the Ludendorff

²¹ Ibid., 277-78.

²² Ian Kershaw, *Hitler. 1936-1945: Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2000), 40.

²³ Ulrich von Hehl, "Die Kirchen in der NS-Diktatur. Zwischen Anpassung, Selbstbehauptung und Widerstand," in *Deutschland 1933-1945. Neue Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft*, ed. Karl Dietrich Bracher, Manfred Funke, and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag GmbH, 1992), 172.

movement. Nordmann also told Holtzmann that Ludendorff faced all sorts of difficulties because many agencies within the state and the NSDAP had differing opinions of him; any attempt to rehabilitate him would become mired in bureaucratic procedure and petty squabbles between offices. Nordmann, who clearly understood the reality of Nazi government, promised Holtzmann that he would try to simplify matters by discussing Ludendorff's situation with the state secretary of the Reich Chancellery Hans-Heinrich Lammers. He also said that he would mention the matter to Hitler. Pleased with the conversation, Holtzmann later told the general that he expected his contact to smooth the way for an eventual repeal of the ban on the *Deutschvolk*.²⁴ A month later, however, Nordmann told Holtzmann that he could do nothing for Ludendorff until Nordmann examined the *Deutschvolk*, an undertaking which would take some time. He then suggested that Holtzmann speak with either Reich Interior Ministry official Ludwig Grauert or Rudolf Buttman, the chief negotiator of the Concordat between the Nazi regime and the Catholic Church and director of the Division of Cultural Policy (*Kulturpolitischen Abteilung*).²⁵

Despite the regime's bureaucratic procrastination, Ludendorff's tenacity appeared to pay off. In the upper reaches of Nazi power Holtzmann and Ludendorff had begun to wear down their opposition. In the middle of August 1935, Himmler, writing that Hitler no longer believed that the questions concerning an SS applicant's prior association with

²⁴ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, May 23, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 283.

²⁵ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, June 21, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 335.

the Ludendorff movement were relevant, ordered Ludendorff's name stricken from the application for service in the SS, thereby eliminating the stigma attached to prior association with his movement. Furthermore, the SS leader determined that in the future those interested in joining the SS would only have to admit their connections to the Tannenbergbund.²⁶ In one stroke of the pen, association with Ludendorff was no longer a reason to reject an applicant for service in the SS, and Himmler immediately notified Holtzmann of this change in SS policy.²⁷

Suppressing neopaganism

The fate of Hauer's movement serves as an interesting counterpoint to that of Ludendorff's. On August 15 the Gestapo asked the German Faith Movement to suspend all propaganda activity and public assemblies until the Ministry of Church Affairs developed a policy regulating religious expression in Germany. Ludendorff did not receive a similar request, so his agitation continued unabated. This development is curious because prominent Nazis such as Heydrich and Frick openly participated in the German Faith Movement. Although Hauer's movement enjoyed the support of some high-ranking Nazis, Goebbels, and perhaps Hitler himself, thought little of it. Goebbels believed it to be "a conglomeration of gasbags, schemers, and malicious racketeering

²⁶ Himmler to the Chief of the Main Office of Security, August 19? 1935. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1246, roll 53 (Verschiedenes).

²⁷ Himmler to Holtzmann, August 24? 1935. NA, file T581 (HdN), folder 1246, roll 53 (Verschiedenes).

philosophers (*Gesinnungsschiebern*).”²⁸ Goebbels also thought little of Ludendorff’s movement, but Hauer did not have Ludendorff’s prestige. Hauer’s movement was also much larger, and therefore more dangerous, than Ludendorff’s.

With Hauer’s movement restrained, Ludendorff’s movement flourished. The district governor of Hanover reported to Frick that Ludendorff’s supporters no longer operated quietly but openly, and in the Hameln area the Tannenbergbund, still officially outlawed, remained especially active. The district governor also mentioned that Political Police in Hanover had concluded that “a new party founding has taken place in Lower Saxony, which, although, not visible throughout the Reich, must not be underestimated here. [National Socialist]-propaganda has not shown a solid argument against the Ludendorff movement. For these reasons, the old party comrades cannot resist this movement.”²⁹ Nazi authorities in the region became alarmed, for the Ludendorff movement had long been strong in the rural areas of Lower Saxony.³⁰

Some officials took matters in their own hands. A single Nazi official, regardless of importance, could, at the local level, create difficulties for the Ludendorff movement. On September 4, 1935, a Ludendorff activist, Otto Karnahl of *Kreis* Halle-Merseburg, reported that a local *Kreisleiter* had forbidden a lecture on the ordinary Ludendorff theme “Rome, Judea, and *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*” on the grounds that the lecture was private

²⁸ Diary entry for April 25, 1936. *Tagebücher*, Teil I, Band 3/II (März 1936-Februar 1937) (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2001), 69.

²⁹ Report for August/September 1935 from the district governor of Hanover, October 4, 1935. Mlyněk, *Gestapo Hannover*, 427.

³⁰ Jeremy Noakes, *The Nazi Party in Lower Saxony, 1921-1933* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 219-20.

and not sponsored by the NSDAP.³¹ A few days later Holtzmann replied that he could do little against the *Kreisleiter*'s decision, but he suggested that Karnahl try to convince the *Kreisleiter* that Ludendorff posed no threat to the regime.³² That same month Holtzmann received a report from another Ludendorff activist that the local police had forbidden the use of Erich and Mathilde Ludendorff's names in lectures sponsored by the Ludendorff Press, an order which appeared consistent with official Gestapo policy instituted the previous year.³³ In Dortmund a book distributor for the Ludendorff Press reported that an *Ortsgruppenleiter*, in an attempt to harm the Ludendorff movement, had been spreading slander about Mathilde Ludendorff's affair with a German officer.³⁴

It is possible that these local officials had interpreted the August 15 prohibition of German Faith Movement propaganda and public gatherings as pertaining to the Ludendorff movement as well. Officials often confused *Deutsche Glaubensbewegung* with *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*. It also appears that Ludendorff activists had become blatantly, almost defiantly, open in their efforts to spread his ideology. Some brazenly disassociated themselves from the Nazis, at times deliberately antagonizing local police and Nazi officials. The Political Police in Hanover reported that they had to prohibit a meeting in Marienhagen, southwest of the city of Hanover, because local authorities

³¹ *Kreisleiter* of Mansf[eld]. See to Otto Karnahl, September 4, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 13.

³² Holtzmann to Karnahl, September 9, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 23.

³³ Attestation from Mayor Dr. Hoffmann, [September?] 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 65.

³⁴ H. Freise, September 27, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 71.

feared the organizer, Herr Neuhaus, a former Tannenbergbund member from the nearby town of Elze, would discuss reactionary politics under the cover of religion. When Neuhaus rented the hall he referred to Hitler as “your Hitler,” refused to give the Hitler salute, and said that Hitler was “not his Führer.” The Political Police also reported that Neuhaus was surrounded by known Communists who had once tried to take power for “the godless KPD.”³⁵

Such observations made the Political Police nervous. Accusations that the Ludendorff movement, as well as similar movements, harbored Communists and Social Democrats had dogged the movement since 1933. If these accusations were true, it is curious that Communists and Social Democrats found Ludendorff’s movement a safe haven from Nazi persecution. Perhaps they reckoned that the police did not consider Ludendorff’s movement an enemy of the Nazi state. Ernst Christian Helmreich concludes that when the police broke up neopagan sects, they often legitimized their conduct by citing the February 28, 1933 Decree for the Protection of People and State and charged the sects of communist activity, thereby upholding the legality of their actions.³⁶ In any case, some local police and administrators had taken the initiative to control the behavior of Ludendorff activists, even though the Nazi regime offered them little guidance.

In one instance it appears that the regime wanted to lift restrictions on the movement but feared the consequences. In October, Holtzmann wrote Ludendorff about

³⁵ Monthly report for October 1935 from Gestapo Hanover, November 4, 1935. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 443-44.

³⁶ Helmreich, *German Churches under Hitler*, 389.

a discussion he had with Heß, who indicated that certain political difficulties made it impossible to remove the ban on Ludendorff's activities. Heß feared that this measure would cause "unnecessary excitement" among the German people. Holtzmann reminded him that the Ludendorff movement, dedicated to educating Germans, addressed only spiritual matters. Claiming to understand this fact, Heß replied that the people were "dumb" and would not interpret things that way. He asked Holtzmann to think of a local Nazi leader who had to close a Ludendorff bookstore because its patrons sometimes became too enthusiastic. Holtzmann countered that such speculations were false because the bookstores remained legal and a local official would not have the authority to close one. Holtzmann also mentioned that the ideas taught in National Socialist training seminars paralleled Ludendorff's. Holtzmann concluded his report by emphasizing that Heß did not reject his arguments and he wanted to hear Holtzmann's future complaints.³⁷ A few weeks later, in the beginning of November 1935, Holtzmann told other Ludendorff book agents that Heß had decided that the Ludendorff Press could continue its work,³⁸ even though it had been unofficially active for months.

Ludendorff and the Wehrmacht

As in civilian Germany, Ludendorff's publications became common in the commissaries and barracks of the German armed forces during 1935. Ludendorff bears

³⁷ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, October 21, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 535.

³⁸ Holtzmann to Otto Junge, November 4, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 261.

responsibility for this development since he and his enterprising agents launched an aggressive campaign to distribute his publications in the Wehrmacht. General Beck admitted to Ludendorff that many in the Wehrmacht read *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft*,³⁹ and Ludendorff received thank-you letters from soldiers admitting that they enjoyed having *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft* in their barracks.⁴⁰ The commander of the 50th Infantry Regiment thanked the Ludendorff Press for sending his men brochures and journals and hoped that they would read them.⁴¹ It is unclear whether the soldiers sympathized with Ludendorff's brand of radical nationalism, but it is clear that they had easy access to Ludendorff's writings.

That summer Ludendorff, exploring the demands nations must satisfy in order to conduct modern war, published one of his more noteworthy books, *Der totale Krieg* (translated into English as *The Nation at War*). The strategic and tactical ideas posed in the book were not original; most military analysts had reached similar conclusions during and immediately after World War I. But Ludendorff succeeded in capturing the attention of the Nazi regime and the rearming Wehrmacht by formulating a provocative argument concerning foreign policy, international relations, and military expansion. Insisting that armed conflict was the natural relationship between nations, Ludendorff sought to reverse Carl von Clausewitz's idea that war was the continuation of politics by means other than

³⁹ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, May 26, 1935. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 27, Mappe 3.

⁴⁰ Ludendorff Press to Holtzmann, October 4, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 107.

⁴¹ Commander Enke to the Ludendorff Press, October 17, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 157.

diplomacy. Diplomacy, according to Ludendorff, simply consisted of low-intensity warfare between competing national interests. In modern international politics, nations competed against each other in a struggle for existence, so a nation must be prepared militarily because its neighbors always threatened to exterminate it. Political activity in peacetime must therefore aim to enlarge the defensive capabilities of the nation and cripple the offensive capabilities of neighboring countries.⁴²

Bruno Thoss points out that since the early 1920s Ludendorff had developed this application of Darwinism to international relations. In his book *Kriegsführung und Politik (Politics and Waging War)*, published in 1921, Ludendorff claimed that nations must necessarily expand in order to ensure their survival in a hostile, competitive environment.⁴³ Almost fifteen years later, he wrote in *Der totale Krieg*, “The days of Cabinet wars and of wars with limited political aims belong to a bygone age. Such wars were marauding and predatory expeditions rather than morally justified combats for the preservation of the nation, as in totalitarian war. . . . For the rest, these wars are most

⁴² For more discussion of Ludendorff and his contributions to the concept of total war, see Jan Reemtsma, “Die Idee des Vernichtungskrieges. Clausewitz - Ludendorff - Hitler,” in *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944*, ed. Hannes Heer and Klaus Neumann (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition HIS Verlags GmbH, 1995) 377-400; and Klaus-Jürgen Müller, “Clausewitz, Ludendorff and Beck: Some Remarks on Clausewitz’ Influence on German Military Thinking in the 1930s and the 1940s,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 9 (1986), 240-66.

⁴³ Bruno Thoss, *Der Ludendorff-Kreis, 1919-1923: München als Zentrum der mitteleuropäischen Gegenrevolution zwischen Revolution und Hitler-Putsch* (Munich: Stadtarchiv München, 1978); 246.

immoral actions, and do not deserve the sublime and serious definition of warfare. They are stirred up and waged out of greed, and not for the preservation of the nation.”⁴⁴

Ludendorff’s significant intellectual contribution to modern warfare lies in his idea of “psychic unity,” which came directly from his experience in World War I. The maintenance of national unity, either through force or, preferably, through cultural and spiritual methods, was critically important to the conduct of totalitarian war, for disunity inevitably led to defeat and extinction. The modern national army depended on the unity of the people, for without this unity the army itself would fall prey to the divisions within society.

The armed forces, rooted in the nation, are a constituent part of it, and in totalitarian war the strength of these forces will be in accordance with the physical, economic, and psychic strength of the people. . . . No state today is likely to fall short in armaments, in training, and in equipping the armed forces, but it is psychic unity alone that enables the people to lend to the hard-fighting armed forces the ever-fresh strength of mind to work for the Army, and in the adversity of war it is psychic unity alone that gives a nation power to remain joyful in its resistance, hoping for victory in the face of the enemy’s military operations.⁴⁵

In this respect Ludendorff subordinated civilians to the military since the nation, as the military’s reservoir of manpower and industrial labor, kept the military viable. A divided nation inevitably led to the collapse of the armed forces and its own extinction.

Officers were, in his opinion, the leaders of society. They divined the mood of the people and the armed forces, they bolstered the morale of the military, and they lifted the spirit of the nation. During his trial in 1924 for his role in the Hitler Putsch he exclaimed:

⁴⁴ Ludendorff, *The Nation at War*, 16-17. I have improved the translation.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 25. I have improved the translation.

The officer's duty is to watch with open eyes the critical questions that move the people. The old army had no drive for politics - thank God - but it was devoted to the Fatherland, nationalist, and monarchist. The Reichswehr must become so, for it is the spirit, not weaponry, which is created in war.⁴⁶

Because of the perilous nature of modern warfare, Ludendorff insisted a civilian leader would prove incompetent during wartime since civilian politicians lacked knowledge of military matters. His denigration of civilian leadership threatened Hitler because, according to Piazza, Ludendorff believed that he himself was the person most qualified to lead the German nation into battle.⁴⁷

Ludendorff claimed that once war erupted a national military figure, a sort of warrior chieftain, must emerge and wield absolute control over the entire national community. This totalitarian warlord enlisted the entire nation and its productive capacity to wage a Darwinian battle for survival. "The Commander-in-Chief," he wrote, "must also investigate whether finances and the domestic economy will meet the requirements of a totalitarian war, and whether measures have been calculated to maintain the national life and to ensure the provisioning of the people and of the armed forces."⁴⁸ He also insisted that "the man who is Commander-in-Chief must hold first place. Anything else is unsound and dangerous. Only with complete power can the

⁴⁶ *Der Hitler-Prozeß vor dem Volksgericht in München*, vol. 1 (Munich: Knorr und Hirth, 1924), 72.

⁴⁷ Piazza, "Ludendorff," 156.

⁴⁸ Ludendorff, *The Nation at War*, 181. I have improved the translation.

Commander-in-Chief maintain unity and force in his actions, which are designated to defeat the enemy and preserve the nation.”⁴⁹

Except for his indirect attack on Hitler, Ludendorff's vision of Germany's future was not far removed from the Nazis'. Indeed, Hans Speier notes that the main difference between National Socialism's and Ludendorff's conception of war lies in the fact that the Nazis sought to justify war on ideological grounds, while Ludendorff understood war as necessary for the defense of the nation.⁵⁰ In all other respects the two conceptions differed little. Both conceptions were racist, nationalist, and anti-Semitic. Ludendorff's martial society reminded radical German nationalists, many of them veterans who found comfort in the paramilitary organizations of the fascist movement, of the hierarchy, camaraderie, order, and excitement of the trenches where each man knew his position, his duty, and his goal.

Ludendorff had some influential sympathizers in the General Staff, despite their skepticism. Holtzmann's personal contact with the most powerful generals in the army considerably helped Ludendorff's fortunes. Most military men accepted the premises behind his theory of total war, and Blomberg admitted that Ludendorff enjoyed the respect of the younger officers in the army.⁵¹ A few isolated individuals expressed discontent with the Ludendorff movement, but in these instances they only demonstrated

⁴⁹ Ibid., 169.

⁵⁰ Hans Speier, "Ludendorff: The German Concept of Total War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (New York: Atheneum, 1966), 318.

⁵¹ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, September 29, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 457.

distaste for Ludendorff's spiritual publications. The commander of the Army and Airforce Intelligence School wrote Ludendorff Press agent Johannes Kaiser that the school permitted Ludendorff's military writings, not his political and spiritual work.⁵²

The Ludendorff Press aggressively exploited the opportunity given to it by Beck when, on October 3, 1935, he had determined that commanders could permit *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft* in the barracks.⁵³ For the rest of the year Ludendorff agents, informed of current army regulations through Holtzmann by his contacts in the General Staff, flooded army barracks with all sorts of Ludendorff publications such as *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft*, Mathilde Ludendorff's philosophical works, and Ludendorff's military studies. At the end of 1935 Sopade informants reported that although most members of the Wehrmacht were apolitical, the younger officers had become more radical and were in some instances enthusiastic Nazis.⁵⁴ Ludendorff was in no way solely responsible for transforming the German military into a radical nationalist institution; the military's broad acceptance of his radical nationalism demonstrates that the Wehrmacht had been already transformed.

This development worried a few generals, but their opposition to Ludendorff's campaign to convert the Wehrmacht was largely ineffective. Those officers most likely to complain were elderly, close to retirement, or religious. At least one, General von

⁵² Lieutenant-General Sachs to Johannes Kaiser, November 6, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 303.

⁵³ Holtzmann to Burr, November 9, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 293.

⁵⁴ Monthly report for December 1935. *Sopade 1935*, 1389-90; Monthly report for February 1936. *Deutschland-Bericht der Sopade, 3. Jahrgang 1936* (n.p., n.d.), A9.

Cramon, the former military liaison to the Habsburg Empire during World War I, still begrudged Ludendorff's treatment of Hindenburg.⁵⁵ Some commanders, finding the publications disturbing, subversive, and dangerous, complained to their superiors. In response, the General Staff, while allowing Ludendorff agents to continue distributing Ludendorff publications in barracks, demanded greater regulation of their distribution. Holtzmann worried that lingering passions associated with the feud between Ludendorff and Hindenburg, as well as some uneasiness with the radical nature of Ludendorff's message, would affect Fritsch's decision to lift the restrictions on *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft* instituted at the end of 1935. Beck confirmed Holtzmann's concerns in January 1936, when Beck mentioned that he had received numerous letters concerning the matter.⁵⁶ Military policy concerning the distribution of Ludendorff Press publications, however, changed little.

Civilian and military policy diverges

State policy concerning the Ludendorff Press did change. Throughout the autumn of 1935 a few Catholics lodged formal complaints with the Gestapo and local administrators, who were unsure how to address their protests. The district governor of Hanover wrote Frick that "the activities of Ludendorff supporters, who are largely former members of the Tannenbergbund, constantly disturbed the peace." He also reported that

⁵⁵ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, January 5, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 12, 6.

⁵⁶ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, January 8, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 12, 11.

“the dissolution of the Tannenbergbund is, in all practicality, an illusion.”⁵⁷

Administrators had good reason to fear an increase in public disturbances from Catholics protesting the agitation of Ludendorff’s agents, although these disturbances were overtly directed at the Ludendorff movement, not the regime. It is likely that these disturbances represented popular discontent with the Nazi regime; Helmreich argues that clergymen realized that they could not challenge Nazism, but could indirectly voice their opposition by confronting neopaganism.⁵⁸ The Political Police in Osnabrück reported that even though the clergy had “fought against the state and movement and disagreed with state policy” in the past, they organized no opposition against the Nazi regime in November 1935, but instead organized protests against the Ludendorff movement.

The regime had to take action against the protesters and the object of their disapproval. After a number of clergymen complained, the Political Police in Osnabrück decided, on their own initiative, to restrict agitation by Ludendorff activists. The Political Police in Osnabrück reported to Gestapo headquarters in Berlin that they were greatly relieved when they received an order from Himmler confirming their decision.⁵⁹ On November 22, 1935, Himmler notified Holtzmann and Ludendorff Press headquarters in Munich that “for reasons of security and order” he had forbidden Ludendorff agents from distributing published material and banned Ludendorff lecturers from speaking because

⁵⁷ Monthly report for November 1935 from the district governor of Hanover, December 4, 1935. Mlynec, *Gestapo Hannover*, 470.

⁵⁸ Helmreich, *German Churches under Hitler*, 406-407.

⁵⁹ Monthly report for November 1935 from Gestapo Osnabrück, December 4, 1935. Steinwascher, *Gestapo Osnabrück*, 297-98.

they “disturb the peace and agitate the people.” In the margin of the notification Holtzmann scribbled that he had no idea what Himmler’s decree meant, demonstrating his uncertainty whether he should take this order seriously; he did not know if the Gestapo would consistently enforce Himmler’s decree since they had not done so in the past.⁶⁰ He had no reason to assume that they would.

In the middle of December 1935, Himmler explained his decision to the Ludendorff Press. He claimed that the German Faith Movement, unlike Ludendorff’s movement, remained legal because it accepted Nazi authority. This was a strange comment to make, for Hauer faced harsher restrictions than Ludendorff. Himmler also emphasized that although he wished to inhibit Ludendorff’s Press, its lecture tours, the dissemination of its publications, and the growth of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*, he had no intention to punish Ludendorff or his wife. He only desired to halt the attempt to make any “religio-political meetings” (*religionspolitischen Kundgebungen*) open and free.⁶¹ A few days earlier Hans Hagemeyer of the Reich Office for the Promotion of German Publications (*Reichsstelle zur Forderung des deutschen Schrifttums*) had warned Holtzmann that “Ludendorff’s politics in the Third Reich are not decisive, but the politics of our Führer Adolf Hitler are, and, in general, it is not absolutely harmless to champion politics not supported by the Führer.”⁶² Shortly thereafter the Reich Office of Popular

⁶⁰ Himmler to Holtzmann and the Ludendorff Press, November 22, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 11, 589.

⁶¹ Order B.Nr. 4022/35 -II 1 C from Himmler, December 13, 1935. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 25, 274.

⁶² Hans Hagemeyer to Holtzmann, December 9, 1935. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 7, 479.

Libraries (*Reichsstelle für volkstümliches Büchereiwesen*) told the Ludendorff Press that booksellers could no longer sell books published by Ludendorff and that it would confiscate any it discovered.⁶³

A number of local police departments were pleased that the Gestapo had finally reached a decision concerning Ludendorff and the activities of his agents. The Political Police in Hildesheim welcomed the revised orders as the final clarification of Gestapo policy concerning Ludendorff's movement.⁶⁴ Political officials were pleased with Himmler's crackdown. It appears that a number of Christian Germans, as well as the Political Police, were able to force the Nazi regime to reconsider its tacit support for Ludendorff's anti-Christian activism. Maintaining order and stability in Germany remained the most important issue that concerned the Nazi regime, and at the end of 1935 the regime faced numerous complaints about widespread shortages of basic foodstuffs. The police suspected that the populace had become dissatisfied with Nazi rule, but they also admitted that they found it difficult to judge the mood of the people because Germans had learned to hide their true feelings from Nazi authorities. Indeed, the district governor of Hanover believed that widespread dissatisfaction with the Nazi regime existed.⁶⁵

⁶³ Order from Dr. Schriemer of the Reich Office of Popular Libraries, December 20, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 61.

⁶⁴ Monthly report for November 1935 from Gestapo Hildesheim, December 2, 1935. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 452.

⁶⁵ Monthly report for November 1935 from the district governor of Hanover, December 4, 1935. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 467.

In the meantime, however, the Wehrmacht General Staff reversed its earlier decision to regulate Ludendorff's activity. The opponents of Ludendorff's *Weltanschauung* had proved impotent. Ludendorff's neopagan propaganda campaign corresponded to a general decline of Christian influence within the military. Neopaganism had been growing slowly but steadily in the military since the NSDAP took power, and Ludendorff's movement was one of many neopagan groups trying to receive recognition.⁶⁶ Fritsch lifted the restrictions on Ludendorff's journal in January 1936, although Beck insisted that the military supervise the distribution of his publications since "they wanted to keep an eye on their own (*Wir wollen doch unsere Wäsche unter uns waschen*)."⁶⁷ Fritsch found Ludendorff's constant harping on *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* tiresome, but in the end he swallowed his distaste and allowed the publications in the barracks.

By February 1936 Holtzmann was able to tell Ludendorff that his struggle to convert the Wehrmacht had been largely successful. He remarked, however, that although Ludendorff enjoyed sympathy in the highest echelons of power, Beck had warned him that he was reaching the limits of the Wehrmacht's good will. "Ludendorff is one hundred kilometers ahead of us," Beck exclaimed, "and he demands that we keep

⁶⁶ For more on Christianity, neopaganism, and the Wehrmacht, see Manfred Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat: Zeit der Indoktrination* (Hamburg: R. v. Decker's Verlag, 1969), 171-99.

⁶⁷ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, January 11, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 12, 17.

up with him!”⁶⁸ Holtzmann, military man that he was, suggested that Ludendorff should be more practical, find a place to defend himself, increase his room to maneuver, and await another opportunity to advance. He even apologized for his caution, but justified it by claiming that it was “for the good of the people.”⁶⁹ The next logical step, according to Holtzmann, would be to wait patiently for the regime to lift restrictions on the Ludendorff movement just as the General Staff had recently done. He was confident that the regime would do so, for he believed that the Gestapo was considering relaxing the ban on Ludendorff publications and lectures.⁷⁰ Ludendorff consented, crowing that he had gained a foothold in Wehrmacht without the approval of “Berlin.”⁷¹

Publicizing Ludendorff's *Weltanschauung*

It appears that the regime's ban, as in the past, had little effect, for although the Political Police in Osnabrück and Hildesheim reported that Ludendorff activity had decreased markedly during the winter of 1936, his followers could still purchase books from his bookstores.⁷² Germans found it relatively easy to find Ludendorff publications

⁶⁸ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, January 30, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 12, 34.

⁶⁹ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, January 30, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 12, 33-35.

⁷⁰ Holtzmann to Ludendorff, February 23, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 12, 59.

⁷¹ Ludendorff to Holtzmann, February 24, 1936. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 24, 136.

⁷² Monthly report for December 1935 from Gestapo Osnabrück, January 6, 1936. Steinwascher, *Gestapo Osnabrück*, 309; Monthly report for January 1936 from Gestapo

regardless of Himmler's restrictions. Frank reported in February that sales of Ludendorff publications in January 1936 were approximately 50% higher than sales in January 1935. The increase in sales followed similar growth in December. Frank concluded that interest in Ludendorff's movement had grown despite the regime's promise to halt distribution of Ludendorff Press publications.⁷³

There are several possible interpretations for these figures. It is possible that sales, although higher than the previous year, had actually declined since the previous summer and autumn, when interest in Ludendorff's movement peaked. It is also possible that the increase in sales represented sales to military personnel. Furthermore, these figures represent sales in Frank's district, not including districts elsewhere in Germany. Frank also did not specify the publications from which his profits came. The Ludendorff Press had become an independent publisher and distributor, which, in order to become acceptable to the Nazi regime, authorized its agents to advertise aggressively and expand their libraries to include all sorts of nationalist publications written by authors other than the Ludendorffs and their allies. Therefore, on the basis of these figures alone, it is impossible to conclude that sales of Ludendorff publications had actually increased across the country. Nevertheless, it appears that in the winter of 1936 bookstores which sold nationalist publications had become centers for the Ludendorff movement, replacing

Osnabrück, February 4, 1936. Ibid., 331; Monthly report for December 1935 from Gestapo Hildesheim, January 7, 1936. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 484.

⁷³ Report from Frank to the chairmen of the Ludendorff Press supervisory board, February 10, 1936. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 61.

the forums of the prohibited lecture tours and offering a haven for Ludendorff activists.

If one wished to purchase something published by the Ludendorff Press, one could.

Evidence that Ludendorff's supporters had extended their reach into German schools also exists. In the early 1930s Ludendorff planned to disseminate his publications in schools and influence student elections in German universities, but he met with little success. Under the Nazi regime, however, the academic climate in schools and universities proved more conducive to his propaganda. In 1935 at the height of the neopagan revival, Ludendorff learned that Bernhard Rust, the Reich Minister of Science, Education, and *Völkisch* Culture, wanted schools to teach students neopagan beliefs so the youth of Germany could become more aware of their racial heritage.⁷⁴ One week after Himmler issued his order banning Ludendorff lectures and publications, Frank instructed distributors of Ludendorff publications to focus their attention on students and requested that monthly reports address attempts to contact them.⁷⁵ In order to facilitate the dissemination of Ludendorff's publications in German schools, in January 1936 the Ludendorff Press contacted Rust, who rebuffed the request, insisting that Ludendorff was

⁷⁴ Frank to Ludendorff Press distributors, February 4, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 63.

⁷⁵ Frank to Ludendorff Press distributors, November 30, 1935, IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 63.

an enemy of the state.⁷⁶ Yet in March 1936 the Political Police in Hildesheim reported that local teachers expressed great interest in Ludendorff's books.⁷⁷

One interesting case in 1936 concerns a particularly aggressive Ludendorff Press agent in Hamburg. The distributor, Georg Eitzen, despite the persistent opposition of Nazi officials, managed to erode their resistance and ultimately gain the support of their superiors by tenaciously corresponding with state bureaucrats and willfully ignoring official regulations. His stubborn determination to distribute Ludendorff publications in neighboring barracks also wore down the resistance of regional Wehrmacht commanding officers, who were less concerned with Ludendorff's radical nationalism or his anti-Catholicism than with his past opposition to the NSDAP. One officer, who disagreed with Ludendorff's *Weltanschauung*, questioned Eitzen's loyalty to the Nazi regime when Eitzen distributed Ludendorff publications in the officer's regimental barracks.⁷⁸ Eitzen tried to convince the officer of the importance of Ludendorff's spirituality and the incompatibility between Christianity and the Wehrmacht, stating that a "100% Christian opinion does not conform to the opinion of an honorable German soldier." He also argued that even if the officer might not agree with Ludendorff's ideology, others in the army would certainly be interested in his material.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ludendorff Press to Bernhard Rust, January 22, 1936. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 61.

⁷⁷ Monthly report for February 1936 from Gestapo Hildesheim, March 4, 1936. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 525.

⁷⁸ Georg Eitzen to Commander v. Hanstein, June 8, 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

⁷⁹ Eitzen to v. Hanstein, June 26, 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

The officer had good reason to suspect Eitzen's legitimacy as a state-licensed publications distributor. In March 1936, Eitzen received a notice from the Reich Association of German Booksellers (*Bund Reichsdeutscher Buchhändler*) stating that on the orders of the Reich Office of Publications he must join the Association.⁸⁰ Eitzen made no response and continued to work independently and illegally without complying with the Association's demands. In October, six months after the first notification, the Association, in more forceful terms, again insisted that he join the Association.⁸¹ Writing that he had no idea that he was supposed to fill out an application for the Association, Eitzen feigned ignorance and stalled for time.⁸² At the end of the month the Association wrote Eitzen that it knew he sold pamphlets which had not been approved by the Reich Office of Literature, and vaguely indicated that it was in Eitzen's "own best interests" to join the Association.⁸³

Eitzen replied that his books and pamphlets concerned topics found in the catalogue printed by the Reich Office of Publications, so the regime must have already approved for distribution the publications in question. He also impertinently thanked the

⁸⁰ Reich Association of German Booksellers to Eitzen, March 11, 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

⁸¹ Reich Association of German Booksellers to Eitzen, October 12, 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

⁸² Eitzen to the Reich Association of German Booksellers, October 12? 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

⁸³ Reich Association of German Booksellers to Eitzen, October 28, 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

Association for its “advice and recommendations.”⁸⁴ In November, the Association, in its reply to Eitzen, threatened that it would notify the president of the Reich Office of Publications if he continued to refuse membership.⁸⁵ Eitzen beat them to the punch, immediately writing the president stating that he, a fellow fighter for a *völkisch* Germany and a hard-working businessman who had to pay for his merchandise out of his own pocket, could not understand why he had to join the Association.⁸⁶ A month later the president of the Reich Office of Publications replied that he had forwarded Eitzen’s letter to the department responsible for supervising booksellers,⁸⁷ and that same day the president told the department that Eitzen need not join the Association.⁸⁸

Eitzen’s case demonstrates the relative immunity Ludendorff’s activists enjoyed. It is unlikely that any other independent bookseller in Germany had as much liberty to sell books as Eitzen, who, like other Ludendorff agents, made his living distributing Ludendorff’s publications to the general public and the army. By 1936 Ludendorff’s agents had learned that Nazi threats against them were largely idle. It appears that they had a considerable amount of freedom to continue their activities as long as they did not

⁸⁴ Eitzen to the Reich Association of German Booksellers, October 28? 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

⁸⁵ Reich Association of German Booksellers, letter to Eitzen, November 14, 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

⁸⁶ Eitzen to the president Dr. Heinl of the Reich Office of Literature, November 21, 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

⁸⁷ Dr. Heinl to Eitzen, December 22, 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

⁸⁸ Dr. Heinl to the Bookselling Department (Gruppe Buchhandel) of the Reich Office of Literature, December 22, 1936. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

question the authority of the Nazi regime or instigate social unrest. The Eitzen case also demonstrates that little coordination and consistency existed between the numerous offices and departments in the Nazi bureaucracy. Eitzen, like other Ludendorff agitators, learned how to play offices against each other and still managed to continue his activism unabated. The Nazi regime, for all its posturing, ultimately tolerated his and his colleagues' propaganda. It is interesting to note that in October 1936, while Eitzen battled with the Association of German Booksellers over his certification, the Association told Holtzmann, who also wanted certification, that it knew of his relationship with Ludendorff but would nevertheless give him the proper credentials.⁸⁹

Disintegration

As early as 1936, and perhaps sooner, a few lecturers, defying Ludendorff, began publicly supporting the NSDAP. The Political Police in Hildesheim reported that in February 1936, a Ludendorff Press lecturer, despite the official ban on such gatherings, openly defended the regime by arguing that international Jewish and Masonic conspiracies had launched an attack on the NSDAP and that only a strengthened Wehrmacht could protect Germany.⁹⁰ It appears that the majority within the Ludendorff movement no longer had a significant amount of hostility toward the NSDAP, and by 1936 they saw it as an ally in Ludendorff's nationalist and *völkisch* struggle. The core of

⁸⁹ Reich Association of German Booksellers to Holtzmann, October 23, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 17, 67.

⁹⁰ Monthly report for February 1936 from Gestapo Hildesheim, March 4, 1936. Mlynek, *Gestapo Hannover*, 523.

the movement came to appreciate the intimate relationship between the Nazi regime, the armed forces, and *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*, and saw all three as partners in Germany's future success.

This development weakened Ludendorff's resistance to Nazism. Another development was perhaps more important: Ludendorff lost two of his closest and most energetic allies in 1936. Frank, who had worked incessantly for Ludendorff since the beginning of 1931, returned to his profession as engineer in March. In July, Holtzmann, who had been an effective mediator and negotiator between the Ludendorff movement, the General Staff, and the Nazi regime, left the Ludendorff movement on bad terms. Throughout June 1936 Ludendorff accused Holtzmann of betraying the movement and lying to him. Holtzmann vigorously denied the baseless accusations.⁹¹ Holtzmann instead turned to the Nazi regime and used his contacts in the General Staff to further his new career in the Wehrmacht, becoming an officer candidate in Military District Command V of Berlin on August 1, 1936.⁹² Holtzmann's defection might have been opportunistic, much like the earlier defections of Waldow and others who joined the NSDAP when it gained power. Yet among his acquaintances he blamed Mathilde for

⁹¹ Ludendorff had accused Holtzmann of disloyalty because he refused to divulge the names of participants in an informal late-night meeting at a Tutzing beer hall. Holtzmann and a few other Ludendorff activists, in Tutzing for a booksellers' conference, had discussed around the beer table the recent defection of Joachim Schwenke, another Ludendorff supporter. Hanno von Kemnitz, Ludendorff's step-son, learned of the discussion and told Ludendorff, who immediately assumed that a conspiracy was developing in his organization. Ludendorff to Holtzmann, June 22, 1936. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 25, 290-91.

⁹² Cursory biography of Robert Holtzmann. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), file index.

undermining her husband's trust in him, concluding that Mathilde exercised too much influence over Ludendorff and his movement.⁹³

Hitler helped perpetuate the animosity between the party and Ludendorff's wife and did much to turn the party against her, although he was careful not to allow the party to turn against her husband. Albert Krebs, the *Gauleiter* of Hamburg until 1933, remembered one of Hitler's more amusing rants:

[Hitler] spent about twenty minutes describing how Mathilde Ludendorff, before she married the General, had tried to infatuate [him] into marrying her. Whether this was a true story, or was only an attempt to ascribe personal motives to the attacks on the Nazi party that the Tannenberg League . . . had just initiated, is neither here nor there. In any case it disclosed Hitler's ability to put things both wittily and maliciously. He peeled off, so to speak, all the high lady's priestly, philosophical, scholarly, erotic, and other skins until all that was left was an evil, sharp onion. Anyone who shared in this peeling process was in all probability immune for all times to any enticements from the House of Ludendorff. And maybe that was the real reason for this ostensibly personal and confidential chitchat.⁹⁴

Himmler disliked Mathilde as well, and, like Ahlemann before him, suspected that she had a hidden past that the regime could use against her, thereby liberating Ludendorff from her grasp. His distrust of Mathilde Ludendorff, however, had more sinister consequences than Hitler's rumor-mongering. In May 1936 he asked SS *Obergruppenführer* Richard Walther Darré, head of the Main Office of Race and Settlement (*Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt*) to investigate, in the utmost secrecy, her ancestry in the Office's Genealogical Archive (*Sippenarchiv*) and report the findings to

⁹³ Cursory biography of Robert Holtzmann. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), file index, 7.

⁹⁴ Allen, ed., *The Infancy of Nazism*, 154-55.

him. Himmler justified his interest in her family background by alluding to suspicions that she had Jewish ancestry. Such a past, Himmler speculated, might explain why she had been a pacifist in Switzerland during World War I, an absolutely false allegation. He also believed that any Jewish ancestry would explain her questionable sexual history and exasperating personality.⁹⁵ Six months later, in November, Darré's appointed investigator, a Dr. Mayer, whom Himmler had specifically requested, reported to the SS leader that he could not find any Jewish ancestors in Mathilde's family and therefore had discontinued his research. However, he found it significant that there existed no fewer than nine "theologians," meaning that he had discovered nine ministers and others who had studied theology, in her family.⁹⁶ Undaunted, in January 1937 Himmler asked the investigator to resume his study.⁹⁷

Reconciliation

Ludendorff continued to frustrate Goebbels as well. Goebbels hoped that Ludendorff would surrender and return to Nazism, but he believed that Ludendorff would stay isolated as long as he remained with his wife. "Too bad about Ludendorff;"

⁹⁵ Order Tgb.Nr. A/1246 from Himmler to Richard Walther Darré, May 8, 1936. IfZ, MA-452, Records of the Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police (Hoover Institute, file T175, roll 26), RFSS/Pers. Stab (V), frame 2214.

⁹⁶ Dr. Mayer to Himmler, November 11, 1936. IfZ, MA-452, Records of the Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police (Hoover Institute, file T175, roll 26), RFSS/Pers. Stab (V), frame 2192.

⁹⁷ Order Tgb.Nr. AR/1246 Bra/W. from the chief of Himmler's personal staff to Dr. Mayer, January 13, 1937. IfZ, MA-452, Records of the Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police (Hoover Institute, file T175, roll 26), RFSS/Pers. Stab (V), frame 2191.

Goebbels wrote in December 1936, “he’s stuck in hopeless extremism. What we could do with him if he listened to reason!”⁹⁸ Nevertheless, reconciliation became more likely as the Nazi regime stabilized and as the last Ludendorff supporters joined the NSDAP. Once the regime was securely in power, and once the Wehrmacht submitted to Nazism, Ludendorff no longer posed a threat to stability. Ludendorff and Hitler could reach an agreement with little sacrifice by either: Hitler had nothing to lose by embracing his former ally, and Ludendorff could not harm Nazism since his most influential supporters had already defected to Hitler. In 1953, Hitler’s former adjutant Wilhelm Brückner told Lindner that Hitler did not seek to increase his prestige when he met with Ludendorff.⁹⁹ Instead, Hitler wanted to strengthen his relationship with Ludendorff in order to further solidify his growing support from nationalists, veterans, and the military, thereby eliminating the last remnants of radical nationalist opposition to him. He also wanted to bind Ludendorff’s supporters closer to the regime in order to subdue their sometimes destabilizing agitation. The Nazi regime co-opted, and was therefore able to control, Germany’s last major independent spokesman for radical nationalism.

In 1954, Holtzmann gave Wilhelm Breucker his own explanation for Ludendorff’s decision to meet Hitler. According to Holtzmann, the Ludendorffs believed that if Hitler died prematurely the German people would spontaneously call on the general to lead the nation. No other German, they thought, had the necessary stature to

⁹⁸ Diary entry for December 12, 1936. *Tagebücher* (März 1936–Februar 1937), 288.

⁹⁹ Wilhelm Brückner to Lindner, November 2, 1953. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 25, 211.

lead the country. Although Holtzmann admitted that he never heard Ludendorff openly say as much, he characterized the Ludendorffs' belief in their calling as "background music without the lyrics: 'When Hitler is dead, we'll take the inheritance.'" By 1936, according to Holtzmann's account, Ludendorff realized that Hitler was not going to die anytime soon and that the Führer was firmly entrenched in power.¹⁰⁰ Taken at face value, Holtzmann's claim appears plausible; Ludendorff did wish to wield power. But he wrote this passage almost twenty years after the reconciliation between Hitler and Ludendorff. He had broken with the Ludendorff movement acrimoniously, and he had an interest in destroying Mathilde Ludendorff's post-war claim that she and her husband were uncompromising opponents of the Nazi regime.

According to Goebbels, Ludendorff initiated the conversation in January 1937, but he made so many conditions that Goebbels refused to entertain Ludendorff's suggestion for a meeting with the Führer. Ludendorff had also recently published a particularly vexing article that forced Goebbels to ban Ludendorff's newspaper for three months.¹⁰¹ Goebbels admitted that Hitler himself banned an advertising film for Ludendorff's newspaper,¹⁰² a revelation which suggests that Hitler, and not only his zealous subordinates, took a keen interest in Ludendorff's propaganda and agitation. This revelation also demonstrates that the Propaganda Ministry allowed Ludendorff to

¹⁰⁰ Holtzmann to Breucker, March 22, 1954. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 25, 323-24.

¹⁰¹ Diary entry for January 22, 1937. *Tagebücher* (März 1936-Februar 1937), 338-39.

¹⁰² Diary entry for January 28, 1937. *Tagebücher* (März 1936-Februar 1937), 349.

advertise his publications even before he reconciled with the Nazi regime. Yet Goebbels, because he believed that Ludendorff wished to stand “outside the law,”¹⁰³ rejected Ludendorff’s repeated demands to meet with Hitler.

On March 12, after mulling for two days the possibility of reconciliation, Hitler decided to speak with Ludendorff provided that Ludendorff made no prior demands.¹⁰⁴ According to Brückner, Ludendorff was ultimately responsible for the reconciliation since it was he who finally accepted the meeting with Hitler after rebuffing Hitler many times in the past. Brückner also suggested that Hitler had lost patience with Ludendorff, and that had Ludendorff refused to meet with him, Hitler would have forgone any further attempts to reach an understanding between the two. The Wehrmacht also played a role in the reconciliation since Hitler refused to go to Tutzing. Since he had no wish to speak with Ludendorff with Mathilde nearby, the meeting took place at the Munich headquarters of the regional army command. General Walther von Reichenau, long sympathetic to National Socialism, attended the meeting. Hitler told Goebbels that he and Ludendorff discussed the “Church question,”¹⁰⁵ which corresponds to Brückner’s later claim that no one discussed military or political plans.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Diary entry for February 27, 1937. *Tagebücher* (März 1936-Februar 1937), 395.

¹⁰⁴ Diary entries for March 10 and March 12, 1937. *Tagebücher*, Teil I, Band 4 (März 1937-November 1937) (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2000), 44, 47.

¹⁰⁵ Diary entry for April 6, 1937. *Tagebücher* (März 1937-November 1937), 82.

¹⁰⁶ Brückner to Lindner, November 2, 1953. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 25, 211.

Wild rumors about the long-awaited meeting circulated inside and outside Germany. At the beginning of 1937 the foreign press had already begun to speculate about Ludendorff's position in Nazi society. After the meeting, Goebbels permitted the baseless commentary, except for the foreign "drivel" about a new state religion, to continue.¹⁰⁷ By the end of March 1937 at least three newspapers, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *New York Post*, and the *Neue Wiener Tageblatt* reported that Ludendorff might be chosen to lead the army. The *Neue Wiener Tageblatt* indicated that the Ludendorff movement had stepped up its agitation, and the *Manchester Guardian*, which discounted the rumors of Ludendorff's future army career, noted that he remained the only figure in Germany who could openly criticize the regime with impunity. The *Guardian* also surmised that once Hitler compromised with Ludendorff the last critic of the Nazi regime would be silenced.¹⁰⁸ In the beginning of April the *New York Post* reported that the German press was "jubilant" over the reconciliation, but added that "Ludendorff is, to put it mildly, an odd character, and the veneration with which he is regarded by those in control of Germany adds to the Mad Hatter atmosphere that clings about the Third Reich."¹⁰⁹

The rumors surrounding Ludendorff's return to the army proved to be false, but nevertheless Ludendorff quickly secured the benefits of reconciliation. Almost immediately after his meeting with Hitler and Reichenau, barriers to his movement

¹⁰⁷ Diary entry for April 6, 1937. *Tagebücher* (März 1937-November 1937), 81.

¹⁰⁸ *The Neue Wiener Tageblatt*, March 31, 1937; *The New York Post*, March 31, 1937; *The Manchester Guardian*, March 31, 1937. BA, Zsg. 117/1046, (HdN).

¹⁰⁹ *The New York Post*, April 2, 1937. BA, Zsg. 117/1046, (HdN).

disappeared. In April Ludendorff published in *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft* that Hitler guaranteed freedom for the believers of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*.¹¹⁰ The Sopade reported that in Bavaria Hitler Youth leaders, young teachers, and SS and SA men, under pressure from the upper levels of the NSDAP and enjoying Ludendorff's and Alfred Rosenberg's moral support, had organized public recriminations against the Catholic Church.¹¹¹ An American observer, also reporting for Sopade, believed Ludendorff to be essential component of the regime; reconciliation legitimized Ludendorff's agitation and allowed him to increase dramatically his anti-Catholic propaganda.¹¹² This observation appears correct; two weeks after the meeting Hitler told Goebbels that "[Ludendorff] can continue [in that direction], and can also bring quite a bit of profit. He and others say what we cannot."¹¹³ On April 23, 1937, Frick ordered all Reich plenipotentiaries (*Reichsstatthalter*), provincial governments, provincial and district governors, chiefs of security police, and local police departments, Reich labor leaders, and party leaders not to discriminate against former members of the Tannenbergbund. Frick also emphasized that the authorities must pass the order to their subordinates.¹¹⁴ On May 8, Frick allowed believers of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* to officially register their religion as *Deutsche*

¹¹⁰ *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft*, April 5, 1937. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 25, 164.

¹¹¹ Monthly report for March 1937. *Deutschland-Bericht der Sopade, Vierter Jahrgang 1937* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Petra Nettelbeck, 1980), 415, 421.

¹¹² Monthly report for August 1937. *Ibid.*, 1067, 1141-42.

¹¹³ Diary entry for April 6, 1937. *Tagebücher* (März 1937-November 1937), 81.

¹¹⁴ Order I A 2688/3500 from Frick, April 23, 1937. BHStA, Reichsstatthalter Epp, Nr. 421, fiche 1.

Gotterkenntnis (*Haus Ludendorff*), an act which gave *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* official status, making it the third confession in Germany, equal in stature to Catholicism and Protestantism.¹¹⁵

The Wehrmacht also reached an agreement with Ludendorff and his agents. In June 1937 the General Staff lifted all restrictions on *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*, declaring that church attendance was voluntary and enlisted soldiers were not required to participate in religious services except for military memorial services.¹¹⁶ Some officers were skeptical of the order. Breucker said one non-religious officer told him: "It was laughable that on Sunday mornings I had to go to church while my men didn't, simply because they belonged to 'Mathilde' or some other crazy sect."¹¹⁷ Regardless of the officer's feelings, the Wehrmacht had made *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* legitimate.

After the reconciliation, Catholics occasionally protested publicly against Ludendorff's agitation. One incident, reported by a Sopade informant, occurred at a Ludendorff bookstore in Upper Bavaria during the summer of 1937. The proprietor of the store had hung a particularly scandalous anti-Catholic poster in the storefront window, which was soon surrounded by a number of outraged farmers. An old, well-dressed man stepped through the crowd and, facing the window, angrily shouted: "This is the greatest scandal I have ever seen! This is the last straw! We won't let this happen

¹¹⁵ Helmreich, *German Churches under Hitler*, 408.

¹¹⁶ Order Nr. 4452/37 J Ic from the Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht Fritsch, June 25, 1937. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 25, 215.

¹¹⁷ Breucker to Lindner, May 11, 1954. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 32, 179.

to us anymore! That poster must come down even if I go to Dachau!” The man then entered the shop, made a “tremendous fuss,” and succeeded in removing the placard.¹¹⁸

Hitler allowed Ludendorff to continue distributing his propaganda, despite the occasional disturbance. At least once he lost his temper with Ludendorff’s aggravating behavior,¹¹⁹ but he resigned himself to the situation, once telling Goebbels that “one can’t do anything about it any more. Let it continue and see what comes up.”¹²⁰ Goebbels believed that Ludendorff was more trouble than he was worth. He still deferred to Hitler’s wishes, but remained determined to fight a “rear-guard action” against Ludendorff’s “unparalleled idiocy (*Oberblödsinn ohnegleichen*).”¹²¹

Ludendorff also faced another scandal in November 1937, when rumors circulated that he had sent abroad a letter which criticized German foreign policy. Hitler’s secretary Martin Bormann quickly controlled the potentially damaging situation by issuing orders which claimed that the letter was a forgery and requiring party members to quash the rumor.¹²² Bormann’s reaction did more than just maintain Ludendorff’s reputation as a

¹¹⁸ Monthly report for August 1937. *Sopade 1937*, 1173-4.

¹¹⁹ Diary entry for August 4, 1937. *Tagebücher* (März 1937-November 1937), 249.

¹²⁰ Diary entry for August 22, 1937. *Tagebücher* (März 1937-November 1937), 275.

¹²¹ Diary entry for August 25, 1937. *Tagebücher* (März 1937-November 1937), 281.

¹²² Circular Nr. 157/37 from Martin Bormann, November 11, 1937. IfZ, Db 15.02 (Anordnungen Bekanntgaben Verfügung Rundschreiben 1937, NSDAP Parteikanzlei).

Nazi supporter; it also protected the regime from any unnecessary embarrassment the rumor might cause.

These were minor incidents. After the reconciliation Ludendorff's life was relatively quiet. His health failed in November 1937 and, after a month of painful confinement to a hospital bed, he succumbed to liver disease on December 20. When Ludendorff was in the hospital Hitler visited him at least once, a gesture which touched Goebbels. He honored Mathilde's wish to bury the general in Tutzling, not in Berlin or at memorial commemorating the Battle of Tannenberg, where the regime could have reaped tremendous propaganda rewards. The regime sponsored a lavish state funeral for him, but his coffin was bedecked with the Prussian war flag, not the official swastika banner. Hitler made a statement to the press stating: "I and the National Socialist movement will remain ever thankful to him, that he, in the time of greatest national emergency, joined, at the risk of his person, to support the fight for a better German future."¹²³ Goebbels noted in his diary that Ludendorff "was a true fighter" and that "his way was often incomprehensible, but his goal was pure and clear."¹²⁴ Mathilde, for her part, reassured the few remaining die-hard Ludendorff supporters that the general, who had insisted that he did not want a state funeral, had changed his mind.¹²⁵

¹²³ *Hannoversches Tageblatt*, December 21, 1937. BA, Zsg. 103/8604 (Ludendorff, Erich), 8601-8604.

¹²⁴ Diary entry for December 21, 1937. *Tagebücher*. Teil I, Band 5 (Dezember 1937-Juli 1938) (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2000), 62.

¹²⁵ Max Bornemann to Mathilde Ludendorff, February 22, 1938; Ludendorff Press to Bornemann, February 26, 1938. IfZ, ED 401 (Nachlaß Georg Eitzen).

It is also important to note that the Nazi regime rarely harassed Mathilde Ludendorff once her husband had passed away. Perhaps it did not do so because in January 1938, *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft* published an allegedly sealed document written in November 1936 by Ludendorff stating that the Ludendorffs' movement must continue its revolution after his death, and that it must support the foreign and military successes of the NSDAP.¹²⁶ It is difficult to validate the authenticity of this document, but regardless of its legitimacy it served as the final link between Ludendorff and Nazism. The regime allowed Mathilde Ludendorff and her supporters to continue publishing and distributing their works, although Goebbels occasionally found it necessary to ban Ludendorff newspapers and close Ludendorff bookstores temporarily. She survived the regime, and after World War II tried to reestablish her *völkisch* religion in the Federal Republic of Germany. She also created the myth that she and her husband had always opposed the Nazi regime, even though in 1951 a court of appeals found that she and her movement were guilty of aiding the NSDAP to power, of supporting the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, and supporting Nazi racial policy.¹²⁷

The judgment was correct. By 1937 the regime had legalized the Ludendorffs' spiritual ideology. The Ludendorff Press was neither the largest nor the most active publishing house disseminating anti-Catholic propaganda throughout Germany in the years between 1935 and 1937, but it was the longest-lived and most independent radical

¹²⁶ *Am heiligen Quell deutscher Kraft*, January 5, 1938. BA, NL 245 (Nachlaß Lindner), vol. 30.

¹²⁷ Munich Court of Appeals, January 8, 1951. BHStA, StK 113932 (Entnazifizierungsverfahren gegen Mathilde Ludendorff).

nationalist movement in Germany during the Third Reich. Himmler told Hans Kurth that although Kurth could not deny that he was an opponent of the party before it acquired power, his association with the Tannenbergbund was not reprehensible.¹²⁸ The Wehrmacht also accepted *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*. By the time of Ludendorff's death, *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* had become for Nazis a legitimate *Weltanschauung*. Ludendorff's vision of a totalitarian society unified in the face of external and internal threats was nearly identical to the *Weltanschauung* of Nazism.

¹²⁸ Himmler to Kurth, September 11, 1937. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 18, 141.

Conclusion

Ludendorff's Legacy and Unresolved Issues

So the general is dead. And now the "State Act." Always around and around and around! How will it continue? I believe they won't choke off the tolerated remnants. Whatever you think of the freedom of religion that prevails around us. . . . When the gods conspire, everything goes wrong. Life is a repulsive thing.¹

-- Hans Kurth to Robert Holtzmann, December 22, 1937

I am overcome with nausea when I think of all the lies and nastiness under the mask of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* - the Roman Church could not do better. But which is better anyway? . . . Your first diagnosis was correct, a lawyer must go there, one that is more than tough (*der mehr wie Haare auf den Zähnen hat*), and then this comedy will be quickly drawn to a close.²

-- Joachim Schwenke to Robert Holtzmann, November 24, 1936

He suffered shipwreck as the apostle of his own gospel. . . . He became lonely because he was consistent in this last of his illusions, and because the disciples of the national resurrection preached by him declined to follow him as far as Wotan. His fundamental errors, however, are alive in millions; they have had the strength to give rise to political parties and to armed forces, and the day may yet come when they will be a real power.³

-- Karl Tschuppik in 1932

¹ Kurth to Holtzmann, December 22, 1937. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 18, 203.

² Schwenke to Holtzmann, November 24, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 17, 110.

³ Tschuppik, *Ludendorff*, 275.

Hans Kurth understood that the Nazi regime staged the pageantry of Erich Ludendorff's funeral, and he was cynical, perhaps experienced, enough to understand the reasons behind the Nazis' lavish memorial service. For Kurth and the others who stood steadfastly beside Ludendorff, the state funeral was sanguine and melancholy, tinged with a touch of hypocrisy. Perhaps they believed that the Nazi ax was trembling in the executioner's hands even as the military band drummed out the last tattoo in honor of the deceased general. With the general firmly entombed in the local cemetery near his Tutzing home, his remaining few disciples certainly grasped that the powerful presence of the *Feldherr* could no longer protect them from the terror of the Nazi regime. Ludendorff's successor, Mathilde, could never expect the Nazis to defer to her as they did to her husband.

Yet she and the rest of her supporters remained unscathed, and the ax remained still. The Ludendorff Press and *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* prospered in the Third Reich after Ludendorff's death; a few years later, in June 1941, the regime suppressed the Christian press for the duration of the war while it permitted neopagan publishers, such as the Ludendorff Press, to continue printing.⁴ The demise of his movement and legacy would come after World War II. Post-war Germans had other concerns and erased from their memories an important figure in modern history, a man who directly affected the lives of millions and shaped the course of the twentieth century. Ludendorff's hand forged German militarism during World War I and helped to shape the character of National Socialism, two creations which, when combined in the Third Reich, led to

⁴ Conway, *Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, 258.

unprecedented human destruction. Ludendorff's story tells us much about Germany during the Weimar Republic and the early years of the Third Reich.

Ludendorff, Hitler, and the radical nationalists

Hitler was not predetermined to win the struggle over the leadership of radical German nationalism. Provincial chieftains, fiercely independent and reluctant to surrender authority over their small clans, weakened the political strength of radical German nationalism since they were reluctant to surrender their authority to a national leader. Among these petty dictators Ludendorff had the initial advantage over Hitler since war veterans in the radical German nationalist movement idolized him and were more willing to submit to his authority. They found a federation of radical nationalist organizations, such as the Tannenbergbund, more attractive than an autocratic organization such as the NSDAP. Ludendorff was the natural midpoint around which radical nationalist organizations orbited. He enjoyed certain strengths: his name continued to command enormous respect and he had close and important contacts among powerful conservative, nationalist, industrial, and military figures. The Tannenbergbund had no radical band of paramilitary thugs akin to Röhm's SA, so Ludendorff's movement did not alienate politically and financially powerful Germans who feared instability unleashed by Nazi storm troopers in the streets. Unlike Hitler, he was a national figure, and the Tannenbergbund was a national organization.

The majority of Ludendorff's followers tended to be veterans, so it is possible that the veterans associated with the Tannenbergbund transferred their obedience from Ludendorff the Quartermaster-General to Ludendorff the *Schirmherr*. Of course, it is

difficult, if not impossible, for the historian to understand the subconscious mind of the radical nationalist war veteran, but we may reach some tentative conclusions. The radical nationalist veterans of World War I considered Ludendorff a superhuman figure, a patriot who loved his country and his people, a general who led Germany to great victories, a martyr betrayed by his own countrymen, and a savior destined to restore German glory. At times their reverence for him appeared religious, and one can discern a cult of personality surrounding Ludendorff. Holtzmann, upon leaving the Ludendorff movement, claimed that he had worked for his leader while under a hypnotic spell.⁵ In 1945 many Germans made the same claim about their obedience to Hitler. In any case, scholars must explore in greater detail the universe of radical German nationalist veterans' organizations.

Ludendorff's political faults, however, erased his advantages, for the zealotry of his followers and his obsession with conspiracies rarely led to political success. Ludendorff's failure to unify the radical nationalists highlights the qualities which made Hitler the better politician. Ludendorff's inability to compromise, his unwillingness to translate his ideology into a coherent political message, his vocal hatred for Christianity, and his organization's structural weaknesses inadequately countered Hitler's more effective strategy of compromising when necessary, co-opting rivals, and speaking to a mass audience. Hitler appeared to be the only realistic alternative to Ludendorff as leader of radical German nationalism. No other radical nationalist had the ability, charisma, and political skills to unify the movement. Hitler had enough wisdom to realize that an anti-

⁵ Schwenke to Holtzmann, November 24, 1936. BA, NL 79 (Nachlaß Holtzmann), vol. 17, 110.

Christian political platform would doom any chance for political success. Level-headed nationalists had reached the same conclusion by 1927; they understood that Ludendorff was more an inspirational figurehead than a political leader. As a result, German nationalists who otherwise sympathized with him and respected his authority gravitated toward the more pragmatic NSDAP. The Tannenbergbund, despite its origins as a political organization, demonstrated greater concern for the *völkisch* education of Germans, and this concern was incapable of forming a political movement which could win victories at the ballot box. By 1929, Ludendorff, the object of derision among ordinary Germans, and abandoned by the bulk of the radical nationalist movement, no longer carried substantial political weight even though at the time the Tannenbergbund and the NSDAP had approximately the same number of members, between thirty and forty thousand each.

The NSDAP's swift and broad increase in popularity in 1930 proved important to the evolution and dissemination of the Ludendorffs' ideology. Some in the Tannenbergbund found the NSDAP more youthful, more active, and more rewarding than the Ludendorffs' organization. The NSDAP siphoned off many supporters from the Tannenbergbund, affecting the Nazi party from within. The remainder of Ludendorff's organization, which became more concerned with the spiritual rejuvenation of the German soul than with practical solutions to the pressing social, economic, and political problems of the early 1930s, contracted as radical nationalists moved toward the successful NSDAP.

Ludendorff and the Nazi state

Ludendorff's experience during the Third Reich supports arguments claiming that the Nazi state consisted of rival fiefdoms, controlled by powerful individuals struggling for ever greater personal power, which competed against each other in Darwinian battles for survival.⁶ Indeed, Holtzmann quickly learned that the fastest, although perhaps the least efficient, way to lift restrictions on the Ludendorff movement was to reach the ear of Adolf Hitler, for he understood that only the Führer could cut through the bureaucratic lethargy and confusion of the behemoth Nazi state.

Bureaucratic inconsistency and the lack of coherent policy led to a gradual restriction, not absolute prohibition, of Ludendorff's activities. Coherent and consistent instructions from the national government addressing the Ludendorff movement were rare, occurring on September 23, 1933, when the regime prohibited the Tannenbergbund; on November 22, 1935, when Himmler prohibited lectures and publications sponsored by the Ludendorff Press; and on April 23, 1937, when Frick instructed all government

⁶ There exist numerous studies investigating this topic. For a summary of the various arguments concerning the structure of the Nazi state, see chapter four in Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship*, 59-79. Important as studies of conflicts within the NSDAP are E. N. Peterson, *Limits of Hitler's Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) and Peter Hüttenberger, "NS Polykratie," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 2 (1976). H. R. Trevor-Roper's *The Last Days of Hitler* (New York: Collier Books, 1962) played an important role in developing this literature. See also, among others, Martin Broszat, *Der Staat Hitlers: Grundlegung und Entwicklung seiner inneren Verfassung* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1969); Hans Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942); as well as David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939*. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967) and Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*. Michael Burleigh's *The Third Reich. A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000) is the most recent addition to the literature surrounding this topic.

officials to halt discrimination against Ludendorff's followers. Local officials expressed bewilderment at the numerous incomplete decrees issued by the Gestapo. These orders, confusing and contradictory, led many local Nazi authorities to rely on their own initiative to interpret and enforce decrees from Berlin. Ludendorff's supporters, after an initial wave of suppression, continued their activities openly with little opposition, although in some regions the police silenced their activities. Further confusing matters, Ludendorff activists demonstrated an astonishing ability to adapt to state restrictions. Holtzmann, Frank, and others continually stressed to their subordinates that they must follow the letter, if not the spirit, of Nazi regulations.

The contradictory policies of suppression and permission evolved not only from institutional inefficiency but also from internal dissent within the party itself. The regime found it difficult to curb Ludendorff's politically irresponsible behavior since some party members, either former members of the Tannenbergbund or simply Ludendorff sympathizers, frequently participated in discussions and lectures organized by the Ludendorff Press. Little evidence suggests that SS, SA, and Hitler Youth attended such lectures simply to keep the peace. In fact, Ahlemann, as well as Breucker, argued that they always intended to bring Hitler and Ludendorff together.⁷ It is apparent that many Nazis considered Ludendorff to be a fellow traveler, and therefore made no serious attempt to halt his propaganda.

When the ideological stakes were clearer, however, the regime acted more confidently against other opponents. The Nazi repression of Ludendorff's movement was

⁷ Georg Ahlemann to Münster *Gauleiter* Dr. Meyer, February 2, 1934. NA, BDC A3345 Series DS G146 (Film Series 8270 HdN).

significantly less brutal than the measures taken against the KPD, SPD, and other opponents. In these instances the differences between the NSDAP and its opponents were more than *weltanschaulich*, which made it easier for the regime to act and easier for the German people to police themselves. The German people understood quite well that the Nazi regime planned to crush its opponents, and this knowledge was enough to hinder any political activities that could be interpreted as criticizing the NSDAP. Ludendorff's ideology was so close to Nazi thought that few could distinguish the one from the other. This ideological ambiguity weakened the state's response to his activity. For Germans, both in Germany and in exile, the positive association between the Nazi regime and the Ludendorff movement appeared obvious.

Voluntary *Gleichschaltung*, or "coordination," by Germans outside the NSDAP aided the Nazi regime in its determination to consolidate its authority over the country, but progress was slow at the local level. In the early years of the Third Reich, not all local officials were party members. Local officials did not necessarily feel compelled to obey enthusiastically instructions from above. Of those who were so compelled, some expressed outspoken sympathy for Ludendorff and could not comprehend why the regime had branded him an opponent. On the other hand, in the first six months of the Third Reich some local NSDAP administrators and spirited SA men took advantage of their positions and gladly harassed Ludendorff activists. In most cases local conditions determined the effect Nazi policy had on the Ludendorff movement. Karl Dietrich Bracher argues that the NSDAP was able to acquire absolute power because it took over

the machinery of the state,⁸ but the regime was not always able to control local administrators. A number studies on the process of *Gleichschaltung* at the local level exist,⁹ but historians still must investigate this area more thoroughly.

Among high-ranking Nazi officials, a consensus concerning Ludendorff's movement appears to have existed: the Nazi leadership consistently sought to accommodate Ludendorff and bring him back to the party, where he would be under Hitler's authority. Despite petty rivalries, Nazis such as Frick, Himmler, and Heß agreed that the party must spare Ludendorff regardless of his troublesome supporters. Perhaps Hitler himself was responsible for this policy, although from existing evidence it is unclear if he was. Nevertheless, the party leadership refrained from eliminating his movement both before and during the Third Reich, even when Ludendorff openly criticized the Nazis and jeopardized order and stability.

Ludendorff and radical nationalism in the German military

Gleichschaltung had also begun to take place in the German military. Ludendorff, even though he was not an active officer at the time, helped to transform the Reichswehr and later the Wehrmacht into a radical nationalist fighting force. His design to advance *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* in the military contributed to the demise of the conservative and Christian *mentalité* of the army. The Nazi regime also had an interest in politicizing the military and wished to make the army into an institution loyal to the regime, but

⁸ Bracher, *The Nazi Dictatorship*, 229.

⁹ See Struve, *Aufstieg und Herrschaft*.

Ludendorff helped to lay the groundwork for future Nazi success in this realm. Before Hitler forced them from command in January 1938, Defense Minister Blomberg and Commander-in-Chief of the Army Fritsch had already acquiesced to Ludendorff's demands and had accepted neopagan radical nationalism in the ranks.

Ludendorff had always blamed Germany's defeat in World War I on a divided populace lacking unity of purpose and belief. To prevent defeat in future wars, unity in the military was to be the stepping stone to a unified German *Weltanschauung*.

Ludendorff's book *Der totale Krieg*, published in 1935, highlighted the importance of social and spiritual unity in the face of outside aggression, since internal disorder led to a weakened society incapable of defending itself. Frank told his book distributors that no military base, government official, state ministry, or school should be without it.¹⁰

Although Ludendorff implied that he, as a military man, would be a more competent leader than a civilian such as Hitler, the Nazi regime found little reason to disagree with Ludendorff's conclusions, and no attempt was made to hinder distribution of the book. Ludendorff had designed a blueprint for a totalitarian society, and his blueprint found a receptive audience in the German military and the Nazi regime.

Ludendorff helped lay the foundation for a totalitarian military society which vigilantly defended against real or imagined enemies who threatened the existence of the nation. For him, totalitarian war was a battle for survival that required the absolute obedience of society, military, and economy to the supreme warlord. National survival in the modern world, he argued, required such a society, since World War I, in his opinion,

¹⁰ Frank to Ludendorff Press distributors, November 8, 1935. IfZ, ED 414 (Nachlaß Herbert Frank), vol. 63.

demonstrated the weakness of Clausewitz's conception of war. "Like totalitarian war,"

Ludendorff wrote,

Politics, too, must assume a totalitarian character. . . . Since war is the highest test of a nation for the preservation of its existence, a totalitarian policy must, for that very reason, elaborate in peace-time plans for the necessary preparations required for the vital struggle of the nation in war, and fortify so strongly the foundations for such a vital struggle that they cannot be moved in the heat of war, neither broken nor entirely destroyed through any measures taken by the enemy.¹¹

Ludendorff's ideal society would be martial, unified by one creed, and ruled by one absolute warlord. The basic purpose of the economy would be to supply and arm the military. Education would consist of military training as well as indoctrination in the national culture.

Ludendorff's vision of society attracted men such as General Walter von Reichenau, who represented the future of the Wehrmacht. After 1935, when the Wehrmacht rearmed and the regime reinstated conscription, the selective professional officer corps had to expand rapidly in order to accommodate the thousands of newly conscripted men. The new officer corps, no longer a select club of aristocrats and technocrats, lost its traditional conservatism as new blood entered the ranks. A modern mass army, as Ludendorff indicated, needed to have a unifying ethos, and that ethos came from the totalitarian Nazi regime securely in power. Ambitious young men desiring greater responsibility and authority in Wehrmacht, which needed ambitious young officers to lead and train the conscripts, advanced more quickly if they were National Socialist. Older officers trained during the final years of the Wilhelmine Empire found

¹¹ Ludendorff, *Nation at War*, 23. I have improved the translation.

such opportunism reprehensible, but time was against them, for they either resigned as did Beck, died as did Hindenburg and General Hans von Seeckt, or were forced from power as was Fritsch. There were plenty of career opportunities available for young officers who hitched their wagons to Nazism.

Walter Görlitz compared the relationship between the Nazi regime and the German military with the Soviet and Fascist regimes and their respective militaries, and found that the end results in Germany, Russia, and Italy were remarkably similar. Just as Ludendorff demanded a uniform *Weltanschauung* in the military, so did Stalin and Mussolini, with varying degrees of success. In 1937 Stalin homogenized the Red Army after he drastically purged the officer corps. In Italy, the result was more mixed since Italian officers had allied themselves with the monarchy.¹² In each case, however, it was clear that in totalitarian states the military must remain unquestionably loyal to the regime. Ludendorff simplified the politicization of the Wehrmacht, although the military was broadly sympathetic to radical nationalism before he began his campaign to transform the *mentalité* of the army. When he and his agents distributed Ludendorff Press publications in the military, he undercut the influence of the remaining conservative Christian officers who could have conceivably opposed the infiltration of *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* and radical nationalism in the military. Beck appears to have been sympathetic to the idea that the General Staff needed a uniform *mentalité*, but he had hoped that the General Staff would maintain its traditional conservative ethos and keep itself removed from politics. Others on the staff, such as General Alfred Jodl, future

¹² Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 277.

Chief of Operations during World War II, proved more willing to submit to the *Weltanschauung* of the Nazi regime.¹³ Once the General Staff recognized *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis* and allowed Ludendorff publications in the barracks, radical nationalist ideology became legitimate despite the traditionally conservative culture of the army. The Nazi regime reaped huge rewards from this development; a radical nationalist and politicized military served the needs of the regime.

The history of the Wehrmacht in the Third Reich has been controversial. Contentious debates in Germany surrounded the Wehrmacht photography exhibition in the late 1990s. It is clear that the subject of the German military in the Nazi era is one that needs further investigation. Historians are only beginning to understand how radical nationalism penetrated the German military and how radical nationalism affected the average German soldier during the Nazi era. The seeds of politicization had already been sown in the years immediately prior to the founding of the Third Reich.¹⁴ As Martin Kitchen argues, the German military was already predisposed to National Socialism, although he may overstate his claim that the military rejoiced when Hitler became chancellor.¹⁵ It is clear that the Nazi regime had begun to earn the loyalty of young officers prior to the removal of Blomberg and Fritsch. Ludendorff's campaign to transform the *mentalité* of the German military may have had enormous and far-reaching

¹³ Ibid., 294.

¹⁴ See Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat*; and Müller and Volkmann, *Die Wehrmacht*.

¹⁵ Martin Kitchen, *A Military History of Germany from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), 281-82.

consequences, for it appears that he had a ready audience willing to embrace his radical nationalist ideology.

Catholicism in the Third Reich

The emergence of the Ludendorffs' anti-Christian ideology paralleled the difficulties Christianity faced in Europe following World War I. The Ludendorffs' anti-Christian rhetoric was reminiscent of the various anti-clerical movements that periodically arose in Europe. Their neopaganism and glorification of the *Volk* was also grounded in the romantic movement of the nineteenth century. In these two legacies, the Ludendorffs combined the long anti-clerical tradition in European history with the modern notion of racist and chauvinist nationalism.

It is hard to predict what the Nazi regime intended for Christianity and neopaganism in Germany, but we can assume that the regime would have continued to encourage the proliferation of neopagan sects at the expense of Christianity, and we can assume that the regime wished to subordinate the Church to the state. Indeed, the conspicuous growth of neopagan activity in the first half of 1935 corresponded to a more aggressive and coercive Nazi stance in the regime's negotiations with the Catholic Church. Catholicism, or any other Christian denomination, endangered National Socialism. Organized religion endangered all totalitarian states, for religion asked people to accept spiritual doctrines outside the material realm of politics. Organized religion also expected believers to declare allegiance to an ideology the state could not control. Benito Mussolini understood as much and reached a compromise with the Italian Catholic Church, negotiating in 1929 the Lateran Treaty which demarcated the

boundaries between Fascism and Catholicism. Along with other concessions, Mussolini compensated the Church for property expropriated during Italian unification, permitted religious education in Italian schools, made mandatory the religious marriage ceremony, and allowed the pope to appoint bishops in Italy, although the state reserved for itself the power to approve the candidates proposed by the pope. In return, Catholicism became the state religion, the integrity of the Vatican was guaranteed, and the Catholic Church recognized Fascism. Both sides gained from the compromise.

Hitler attempted to do the same in 1933, although an agreement with the Catholic Church was not as important for him as it was for Mussolini; a smaller proportion of the German population consisted of Catholics. Hitler was willing to recognize the legal status of Catholicism in Germany in return for the dissolution of the Catholic Center Party, yet he never seriously considered adhering to the 1933 Concordat with the Vatican. Kerrl discovered that he had little power to negotiate another agreement with the Vatican, and after the ill-conceived Concordat of 1933, the Vatican proved to be an unenthusiastic partner.

Ludendorff, like other neopagans, was an unknowing participant in a political contest between the Catholic Church and the Nazi regime. It may be coincidental that interest in neopagan movements increased in 1935 when negotiations between the Church and the regime had collapsed, when the regime made public statements against political Catholicism, and when it instituted regulations restricting Catholic youth organizations. If so, the Nazi regime took advantage of the situation, for neopaganism pressured the Catholic Church from below while the Nazi regime pressured it from above. The regime could, and did, halt neopagan activism whenever it wished, especially when such

activism threatened order and stability. Neopagan movements proved convenient scapegoats when anti-Catholic activism threatened social stability; they served as acceptable and harmless targets for those dissatisfied with Nazism. The neopagan groups, then, were valuable, since anti-Nazis could safely express their disapproval of Nazism by attacking neopaganism, and the Nazis could satisfy critics by restricting neopagan activity.

Historians have yet to investigate thoroughly the interesting topic of neopaganism in the Third Reich. It is clear that numerous neopagan groups existed at the time, with Ludendorff's movement and Jakob Wilhelm Hauer's German Faith Movement being the two most important examples. It also appears that Hauer's movement was the more popular of the two, and it enjoyed the patronage of high ranking Nazi officials and noteworthy radical nationalists. Historians as well as Germans at the time often confused Ludendorff's and Hauer's movements, but there existed substantial differences between them. Hauer's movement acknowledged the authority of the Nazi regime, and the regime assimilated it more rapidly than it did Ludendorff's. There also existed a significant amount of competition between Hauer and Ludendorff. Clearly, historians must study in greater detail this unknown chapter in the history of the Third Reich, for we know little about those who followed neopagan beliefs, why they followed them, and how the Nazi regime cultivated and controlled neopaganism.

Ludendorff and Germany during the interwar years

After Germany's defeat, Ludendorff and other radical nationalists advocated the reconstruction of German society. Desiring to eliminate internal dissent and forge

political unity, the radical nationalists wished to create, by appealing to the *Volk*, a unified society founded upon race and the national culture's shared beliefs and values. Despising the excessive individualism of modern society they considered cohesive national identity more important than individual rights. Their radical nationalism cherished the romantic notion of a national community firmly grounded in the nation's past. Vindictive, they sought to avenge past wrongs that internal or external enemies had inflicted upon the national community. Radical nationalism became a powerful political and social force that promised to deliver alienated people from the evils and uncertainties of modern, international society. Ludendorff, apolitical before 1918, was among those who pushed radical nationalism to the forefront of German politics after World War I.

As Bruno Thoss has argued, Ludendorff not only straddled two different German classes, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, but also two different eras in German history.¹⁶ In a sense, his situation parallels the problem Germany faced as it evolved from the Wilhelmine Empire into the Weimar Republic. Ludendorff, encountering considerable opposition in the officer corps, advanced in the traditionally aristocratic military by virtue of his own merits. His insecurity as an outsider, his tenuous association with the traditional elite, and his confidence as a self-made man combined to make a potent, muddled, and contradictory personality. He, like other members of the officer corps, as well as those war veterans unable to relinquish the unique society they had created in the trenches, found it difficult to make the transition to democracy after the war. Just as German society during the Weimar Republic proved unable to support

¹⁶ Thoss, *Ludendorff-Kreis*, 4.

democracy wholeheartedly yet could not return to the authoritarian Second Reich, Ludendorff was trapped in the no-man's-land between the pre-modern and the modern. Ludendorff realized that a modern, industrial, and German society needed restructuring and a new sort of leader must emerge from the German people, but he also defended rural society and its economy. He was unable to reconcile his desire for a rural society with technocratic industrial militarism. Nevertheless, he understood that it was impossible for Germany to continue adhering to the out-dated conservatism of the aristocracy. Proud of his substantial accomplishments, he refused to add the aristocratic "von" to his name when Kaiser Wilhelm II offered him the title. Yet, as seen in his book *Der totale Krieg*, he still remained elitist, for although he was no aristocrat he represented a new kind of technocratic, authoritarian, yet also meritocratic, German elite found at the end of the Second Reich and strengthened by the experience of World War I.¹⁷

Perhaps Ludendorff's dual background suggests another reason why Hitler proved more successful than his competitor. Unlike Ludendorff, who seemed to believe that the ruling elite must manipulate the obedient masses and mold their recalcitrant but ultimately receptive minds, Hitler understood the subtleties of modern mass politics and the complex relationship between leader and follower. Hitler realized that he must clad the iron fist of National Socialism in a velvet glove, while Ludendorff never understood the need for such accessories. Ludendorff's philosophy of leadership belied his career in the military and his close proximity to the German ruling class in the Second Reich.

¹⁷ See Struve, *Elites against Democracy*.

Germans in the Weimar Republic recognized that Ludendorff represented a bygone era. For some, especially on the Left, Ludendorff's origin in the military elite of Wilhelmine Germany was a permanent stain on his reputation. For others, especially among radical nationalist war veterans, it was a badge of honor. He bridged the political and social divides created by World War I, which explains why Hitler believed him so valuable to the NSDAP. Ludendorff legitimized radical nationalism by connecting it to the memory of the conservative Second Reich. When associated with Ludendorff, Hitler could claim that he represented a new political and social force which dismantled the aristocratic conservatism of the Second Reich while maintaining its demand for order and stability.

The social and political contradictions embodied by Ludendorff proved advantageous for Nazism. By 1937 the NSDAP, the Wehrmacht, and, to a lesser extent, German society accepted Ludendorff's ideology. In the regime and the Wehrmacht he had tacit allies who helped to legitimize and propagate *Deutsche Gotterkenntnis*. Those who sympathized with him and his ideology existed at all levels of the Nazi hierarchy. Although today he may be forgotten, and although his memorial shrine in Tutzinger See may be neglected, Erich Ludendorff was one of the most important Germans of the twentieth century.

Glossary of Abbreviations

BA	Bundesarchiv Koblenz (German Federal Archive in Koblenz)
BDC	Berlin Document Center
BdM	Bund deutscher Mädel (German Girls' Association)
BHStA	Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (Bavarian State Archive)
BVP	Bayerische Volkspartei (Bavarian People's Party)
DNVP	Deutschnationale Volkspartei (German National People's Party)
DSP	Deutschsozialistische Partei (German-Socialist Party)
DVFB	Deutschvölkische Freiheitsbewegung (German-<i>Völkisch</i> Freedom Movement)
DVFP	Deutschvölkische Freiheitspartei (German-<i>Völkisch</i> Freedom Party)
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei (German People's Party)
Gestapo	Geheime Staatspolizei (Secret State Police)
HdN	Hauptarchiv der NSDAP (Main Archive of the NSDAP)
IfZ	Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich (Institute for Contemporary History)
Jungdo	Jungdeutscher Orden (Young German Order)
KdF	Kraft durch Freude (Strength through Joy)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
LG	Ludendorff Gedenkstätte (Ludendorff Memorial)
NA	National Archives and Records Administration, Washington / Captured German Documents
NSBO	Nationalsozialistische Betriebszellenorganisation (National Socialist Factory Cell Organization)
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (Nazi Party)
NSFB	Nationalsozialistische Freiheitsbewegung (National Socialist Freedom Movement)
NSFP	Nationalsozialistische Freiheitspartei (National Socialist Freedom Party)
SA	Sturmabteilung (Storm Troop)
SAR	Sturmabteilungsreserv (Storm Troop Reserve)
SD	Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service)
Sopade	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (exiled executive committee of the Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)

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<i>Ludendorffs Volkswarte</i>	(1929-1933)
<i>Tannenberg-Jahrweiser</i>	(1931-1938)
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