



William Brownell, Denise Drace-Brownell. *The First Nazi: Erich Ludendorff, The Man Who Made Hitler Possible.* Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2016. 356 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61902-609-4.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Members of H-War and students of Erich Ludendorff, World War I and Hitler will benefit very little from this book. A committee made up of Will Brownell, his wife, Denise, and wealthy Czech businessman Alexander Rovt have written a hobbyist's view combining these three topics. Although all authors have a doctorate of some sort (two PhDs and one JD), their qualifications are otherwise indeterminate. Most telling, despite a great many assertions of fact and hundreds of direct quotes, the book contains no footnotes or citations. The best the authors can muster are a few in-text references to pertinent book titles, *Life* magazine, the *Eugene* [Oregon] *Guard-Register* newspaper (!), plus some "As Professor Isabel V. Hull of Cornell University has written ..." acknowledgements sprinkled throughout. Therefore, we have no idea what is an original thought and what has been lifted from sources. The authors analyze their subjects with Wiki-level sophistication and make conclusions in a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fashion sure to disappoint the serious reader.

What the authors attempt to do is demonstrate a fundamental link between Ludendorff and January 30, 1933, WWII, and the Final Solution. Of course, since coincidence is not causation, they cannot. Real historians marshalling documented facts probably could not prove a direct

connection, either. Granted, the two men had some common attitudes and ideas. Ludendorff and Hitler both had irrational faith in ultimate victory against long odds, but *The First Nazi* does not show that the general led to the führer. Post-WWI Ludendorff was an opportunist who attached his name to any number of anti-Weimar causes and happened to be in Munich in November 1923, but that does not make him a *Parteigenosse*. Additionally, the Nazi Party program in those early days was morphing. While it surely had many anti-republican, anti-Semitic, and revanchist features with which the general (and many post-WWI Germans) would have agreed, he would have cared little about the South Tyrol and other Nazi causes. Contrary to the authors' incorrect claim, Ludendorff ran for German president in 1925 as a far right, not a Nazi, candidate. The anti-Christian philosophy he picked up from his second wife in the mid-1920s had nothing to do with Heinrich Himmler's later paganism. Ludendorff and Hitler were basically estranged for a dozen years until just before the elder's death. In fact, in the mid-1930s, Generals Werner von Fritsch and Ludwig Beck tried to enlist Ludendorff in their resistance against the Nazis. These nuances are beyond the present, sensational book.

The First Nazi is basically a biography, which includes all the hazards of that genre. Generational and century-long structural or systemic issues—Prussian, German, or European—are presented as personality traits unique to Ludendorff. They include militarism, anti-Semitism, and generals' callousness toward excessive battlefield losses. And of course, according to the authors, all these are Ludendorff's legacies to Hitler. Never mind the Carthaginian peace of Frederick the Great over Saxony or Wilhelm I over France; since Ludendorff used this model at Brest-Litovsk, he alone set the example for Hitler. Biography obscures agency in two critical areas: the roles of Paul von Hindenburg and the Third Army High Command (OHL). *The First Nazi* ignores modern interpretations so Hindenburg is still portrayed like decades ago as the doddering, avuncular tool of the brilliant and dynamic Ludendorff.[1] Likewise the Third OHL and its clever staffers like Colonel Max Bauer, which anticipated many of Ludendorff's actions and initiatives, are not to be found in this book.

The authors' unfamiliarity with German history, the basics of military operations, the German language ("Göering"), et cetera, is the weak foundation of their work. Worse still is their lack of knowledge and errors about their main subjects: in places, Ludendorff is a field marshal (p. 204), while his headquarters is in Potsdam (p. 101) and the 1914 German army is mechanized (p. 25). When describing the Battle of Tannenberg, first the Russians had "reserves of shells" (p. 10), but then lost because they "did not have enough shells" (p. 15). The authors claim a British officer introduced Ludendorff to the concept of "Stab in the back" after the war, when actually much earlier the term was used around Third OHL HQs during the final summer of the war. Mistakes of fact like these are legion.

Annoying and nonacademic stylistic problems abound as well. *The First Nazi* sets up frequent strawmen such as "most educated people"

(p. 113) and "most analyses" (p. 229). Also, there are analogies of questionable utility to the American Revolutionary War (p. 39) and Vietnam War (p. 57), plus other anachronistic and head-scratching leaps. The book contains numerous short digressions that are equally jarring: regarding Rudyard Kipling (p. 64), V. I. Lenin in Zurich (p. 95), the Red Baron (p. 117, complete with reference to Snoopy from Charles Schultz's *Peanuts* comic strip, p. 150), and the behavior of Teddy Roosevelt's children in the turn-of-the-century US White House (p. 164). These limitations compound the book's numerous scholarly problems.

Finally, *The First Nazi* jumps to conclusions supported neither by history nor the authors' own flimsy narrative: Ludendorff "launched the Nazi Party" (p. 3), "He was integral to killing 6,000,000 Jews" (p. 217), and "One wonders whether without him there would have been a Second World War" (p. 229). We have enough trouble defining fascist or Nazi, and surely, Ludendorff may have been close to either in many ways. However, *The First Nazi* uniformly fails to make its argument for cause and effect. Large-font "Nazi" and a big swastika party pin on the dust cover may boost sales to the unwary, but the rest of us will have to wait on serious works about Ludendorff by Jay Lockenour and others. *The First Nazi* has no place in legitimate scholarship of WWI and foundations of the Third Reich.

Editorial note: This book has been withdrawn from sale in North America at the author's request.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg: Power, Myth and the Rise of the Nazis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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