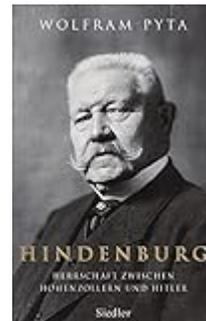




**Wolfram Pyta.** *Hindenburg: Herrschaft zwischen Hohenzollern und Hitler.* Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2007. 1117 pp. ISBN 978-3-88680-865-6.



**Reviewed by** Richard E. Frankel (Department of History & Geography, University of Louisiana at Lafayette)

**Published on** H-German (March, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Eve M. Duffy (University of North Carolina Chapel Hill)

## Charismatic Leadership and the Bridge to the Volksgemeinschaft

With the publication of his masterful new study, *Hindenburg: Herrschaft zwischen Hohenzollern und Hitler*, Wolfram Pyta has shed valuable light on a further dimension of the issue of leadership in German political culture. Pyta argues that Paul von Hindenburg, as charismatic leader, served as a “bridge” between those other two towering charismatic figures of modern Germany, Otto von Bismarck and Adolf Hitler. In exploring this role, Pyta has produced not simply a biography, or even a “life and times,” of a great man, but rather a sophisticated study of both the life and the *image* of a man who was present at some of the most critical moments in modern German history. And this contribution is extremely important, for it is Hindenburg’s image—much more than any of his actual accomplishments—that is crucial to understanding his significance in German history.

After all, the event that “made” Hindenburg—the Battle of Tannenberg—was Erich Ludendorff’s accomplishment. But if the victory was Ludendorff’s, the spoils all went to Hindenburg. By carefully cultivating his image, Hindenburg could rise from an unknown, recently un-

retired general to the nation’s most powerful national symbol in a matter of months. It began with his renaming of what more accurately should have been called the “Battle of Gilgenburg and Ortelsburg” to the “Battle of Tannenberg.” Through this act, Hindenburg constructed an historical connection that linked the defensive struggle against Polish and Lithuanian forces in 1410 to Germany’s contemporary “defensive” struggle against the forces of tsarist Russia. Still, as Pyta shows, Hindenburg could not have succeeded in his efforts had he not enjoyed the good fortune of a remarkable confluence of factors, all of which favored his rise to the level of ultimate national symbol. Tannenberg was a victory he had to share with no other army leaders. Moreover, coming as it did at the same time as the disaster on the Marne, the battle meant that the public could turn its attention to the story of success in the East. The significance of defeating Russia should not be underestimated, either—with all of the negative elements associated with the tsarist empire, Hindenburg could be praised by Germans across the political spectrum. Finally, the singular nature of this battle

of annihilation—the fact that it could not (and would not) be repeated—meant there would be no competitors for his heroic stature.

Luck alone was not enough to create a national hero. In a most deliberate and determined fashion, Hindenburg worked to shape his image for the remainder of the war (an activity that occupied more time, it would seem, than his actual war-planning activities). Through a variety of media he cultivated an image not just of power, but of calm in a time of national danger. In addition, he sought to protect his newly gained charismatic authority by studiously avoiding any action that might in any way detract from or harm that image (or, if such was truly unavoidable, he would make sure to revise the story of such events after the fact). One sees this activity in his role in the kaiser's abdication and ultimate flight to Holland, or when he advised the government to sign the Treaty of Versailles and skillfully passed off responsibility for the decision to his adjutant Wilhelm Groener. The willingness of others who knew better to go along with such rewriting of history is one of the more striking elements of the story.

All of this image-making would be fascinating in and of itself, but its significance for the course of modern German history becomes clear when Pyta connects these efforts to Hindenburg's particular conception of politics and thus to the ultimate purpose to which he dedicated the application of his charismatic powers. According to Pyta, Hindenburg "could think of the *Volk* only as a *politically unified body*, whose will to unity was so manifestly reflected only for the first time in the August experience of 1914" (p. 257). Politics, for Hindenburg, thus meant the maintenance of national unity—of that "spirit of 1914"—in the face of any and all forces that might seek to divide and thus undermine the nation. In his political role as head of the Third Oberste Heeresleitung (OHL), this translated into relentless attacks on Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg that reached dramatic levels by December 1916. In the wake of defeat, it meant a leading role for Hindenburg in the propagation of the notorious "stab in the back" legend. In the Weimar Republic, it led him to seek the president's office, through which he felt he could best apply his charismatic authority to recreate the unity of 1914 by reestablishing the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

According to Pyta, this vision of a firmly unified national community (and the drive to realize it) ultimately connects Hindenburg to Hitler. The National Socialists' dramatic victory in the September 1930 Reichstag elections presented the Reichspresident with a potential—

though by no means insurmountable—challenge. In the figure of Hitler, Hindenburg faced someone who also sought to recreate the *Volksgemeinschaft* through the exclusion of any and all divisive forces, particularly the Marxist Left, and who claimed himself to embody the nation, albeit from a different perspective. In contrast to the venerable field marshal, Hitler embodied the nation as a mere front soldier, as one who claimed to have experienced the truest form of national community in the trenches of the western front and who suffered directly the consequences of national divisiveness through the "stab in the back." For those of the "front generation," Hindenburg was a part of the old imperial society that had proven too weak to prevent division and betrayal. Still, according to Pyta, enough common ground was available in both Hitler and Hindenburg's visions of the *Volksgemeinschaft* to leave open the possibility of cooperation. The eventual realization of this common vision would come on January 30, 1933. Satisfied that he had in fact fulfilled his political life's work by appointing Hitler chancellor and thus brought about the cherished *Volksgemeinschaft*, the aging Reichspresident transferred his charisma to the *FÄ¼hrer* through his political testament, the final link that completed the bridge that spanned from Bismarck to Hitler.

If I had one issue with the book, it is Pyta's discussion of the *Volksgemeinschaft*—the fundamental vision connecting Hindenburg to Hitler. Although on one level, common elements between the two are clear, Pyta rarely delves beneath the surface of just what the term, and thus the vision, truly meant for each man. In a very real sense, for Hitler, the *Volksgemeinschaft* was not a "national community," but a *racial* one. Pyta never deals with this racial element. In fact, the only mention of Jews or antisemitism that I detected is a passing reference to the passage of the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, when Hindenburg insisted on an exception for Jewish war veterans (p. 832). Did the Reichspresident have any true sense of Hitler's racial vision? For Hitler, it probably did not matter one way or the other. After all, he was willing to utilize the Iron Chancellor's charisma for his own purposes, despite his recognition that "the good old Bismarck did not have the slightest idea about the Jewish problem." [1] But if Hindenburg truly was the "bridge" that Pyta portrays him as, such information on his views would be of great interest for understanding the evolution and continuities of national identity, racism, and antisemitism over the course of German history.

That being said, Pyta has produced a magisterial

work. Relying on an exhaustive archival base and a consistent theoretical framework, he has written a convincing and sophisticated analysis of Hindenburg's role in the history of Germany during the first third of the twentieth century. The book stands alongside works on the images of the other charismatic leaders of modern Germany, Bismarck and Hitler, and should also stand—as Ian Kershaw's biography of Hitler has for that historical figure—as the last word for a generation on the Field Marshall and Reichspräsident Paul von Hindenburg.[2]

## Notes

[1]. Hitler, quoted in Richard E. Frankel, *Bismarck's Shadow: The Cult of Leadership and the Transformation of the German Right, 1898-1945* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005), 173.

[2]. Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), and Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Richard E. Frankel. Review of Pyta, Wolfram, *Hindenburg: Herrschaft zwischen Hohenzollern und Hitler*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23665>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.