



**Jesko von Hoegen.** *Der Held von Tannenberg: Genese und Funktion des Hindenburg-Mythos (1914-1934).* Stuttgarter Historische Forschungen. Cologne: Böhlau, 2007. xii + 475 475 pp. EUR 54.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-412-17006-6.

**Reviewed by** Michael B. Barrett (Department of History, The Citadel)

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

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## All Things to All People

Timing is everything. If any figure in recent German history illustrates that aphorism, it is Paul von Beneckendorff und von Hindenburg, whose long life played out on front stage of the last two of Germany's three empires. He was present at the birth and presided over the death of the Second Reich, and his decision ushered in the Third. Plucked from retirement and obscurity in August 1914 to salvage an impending military disaster in East Prussia, his arrival at the front coincided with the reversal of the situation, launched by Max Hoffmann, and German forces annihilated the invading Russians at Tannenberg. The elements of the Hindenburg myth coalesced: he came from nowhere, took command, turned chaos into order, defeated a much larger force, and in so doing, saved East Prussia and the nation from catastrophe. The savior of Tannenberg soon became the liberator of East Prussia when his forces routed another invading Russian army. He never looked back.

Hindenburg would serve as the basis of many more icons, and in great detail, author Jesko von Hoegen's monograph leads us through the genesis and construction of each: the genius warlord, the embodiment of the god of war, the repository of trust and confidence, the national hero, the face of victory, and even Otto von Bismarck's successor. When defeat came, its shadows did not touch him. Instead, he and his armies remained "undefeated in the field," and he emerged unscathed as the moderator of the transition from empire to republic, the

loyal Eckart (a figure of medieval German sagas), and once again, the savior, but this time as marshal-president, soldier-statesman, substitute kaiser, a transition figure with one foot in the past, the other in the present, around whom all could unite. Of the many symbolic images the old man embodied, this last one, the savior, transcending discord, rallying the disheartened, and illuminating the path of national unity, was the most endearing and the basis of the myth that Hindenburg and Hindenburg alone could rally the nation and hold it together in times of stress. The drama played out with the transition to the Third Reich, symbolized by the reconciliation of the marshal and corporal at the infamous Day of Potsdam.

After defining terms ("symbol" and "myth") and outlining his thesis—that the Hindenburg myth centered on the marshal as savior of the nation whose leadership alone promised to unify a divisive society—Hoegen reviews the literature and examines the marshal's emergence as a symbol or icon and myth after the Battle of Tannenberg in 1914 up to his death, twenty years later. Within this largely chronological framework, he explores the Hindenburg icons and images as each emerged. His sources include memoirs, pictures, poems, paintings, cartoons, caricatures, and, above all, contemporary press accounts. The press excerpts are interesting, lively and informative, and Hoegen integrates them well with the secondary literature. The author's judgments are balanced and supported by copious evidence, and he succeeds in

explaining the German people's semi-worship of a figure whose leadership, military and political, was deeply flawed.

Hoegen argues that the genesis of the myth stemmed from divisions in Wilhelmine society that existed long before the *Reichsgründung*: Protestant vs. Catholic, labor vs. capital, urban vs. rural, north vs. south, pre-industrial vs. modern. The Second Reich's founders had papered over but not cemented these cracks, and Wilhelm II proved woefully inadequate at the task of integrating these disparate factions into a unified nation. Aware of their lack of unity at the onset of the war, Germans initially rallied (*Burgfrieden*, Spirit of 1914), but the longer the war lasted, the greater the likelihood of exacerbating fissures whose rupture could only weaken the effort, leading to calamity. Germany needed a leader who symbolized unity.

Germany also craved heroes, writes Hoegen, especially since such figures were conspicuously lacking in a war that epitomized industrialization. Mass and materiel triumphed; as the war ground on, individuals gave way to machines. Mired in the glories of the last war, which had produced the demi-gods Bismarck, Albrecht von Roon, and Helmuth von Moltke ("the Elder"), the German public needed to see an individual who could seemingly control what had become mechanized slaughter.

Into this breach came Hindenburg. His signal victory over the Russians at Tannenberg was, of course, the first in a campaign fraught with symbolism. The battle was waged on German soil, and it implied a symbolic reversal of the defeat of the Teutonic Knights centuries before. Hindenburg, notes Hoegen, soon became the "Liberator of East Prussia" and above all, the "Savior." That the Russians had not actually conquered the province mattered little; Hindenburg and Tannenberg came to symbolize the triumph of culture over barbarism, the West over the East, liberty over despotism. All of these elements served to rally a people poorly integrated into a common war effort. As for the man, he could not have fit the image better. Completely unknown to the public before the war, and with military censorship throttling inquiry, reporters nonetheless inventively filled the gaps. His size appeared to embody solidity, strength, and steadfastness; his age represented experience and wisdom. His modesty, sobriety, tranquility, iron nerves, devotion to duty, bravery (he had been wounded in 1866) and self-confidence—these traditional German virtues that had formed the nation and would carry it through its present travails. Being an officer in a society where the military enjoyed the

highest prestige and hailing from minor Prussian nobility did not tarnish the image either. The German population took him to heart, dropping the "von" and calling him "unser Hindenburg." His unpretentiousness contrasted favorably with the pompousness of the kaiser, and it was inevitable that he came to compare favorably with Gerhard Leberecht von Blücher, the aged but vigorous folk hero of the Napoleonic Wars. Most importantly, writes Hoegen, the groundswell that elevated Hindenburg from successful general to *Volksheld* rose spontaneously from the people, not the Army Press Office. His popularity was genuine.

The breadth of the Hindenburg myth allowed Germans to view Hindenburg as they wished. He could be something to each: victor, strategist, liberator, symbol of unity, ersatz kaiser, and so on. During the war, the myth largely worked. Hindenburg achieved an almost god-like status, moving from a victorious warlord to the strategic genius at the helm of Germany's war machine—indeed, eclipsing the kaiser, who saw where this sentiment was heading. Though slightly tarnished in the debates over war aims, Hindenburg managed to escape responsibility for the catastrophe that he and Erich Ludendorff had created. Hoegen offers two reasons for this good fortune. First, Hindenburg had become so identified with the nation that to admit he had failed was to concede the nation had as well—a problem that fed the stab-in-the-back legend. The marshal necessarily became its spokesman, and a public that declined to accept reality rushed to blame easy targets. Second, what blame did fall on the military was transferred to Ludendorff. Hoegen expresses his amazement at this development, because military custom placed commanders and their chiefs of staff in the same boat. Hindenburg and Ludendorff owed their appointment to the demise of another commander—chief of staff pairing, Maximilian von Prittwitz and Alfred von Waldersee, who were jointly relieved of duty when the former appeared to lose his nerve on the eve of Tannenberg. While Ludendorff's combative personality and increasing instability made him an easy target, the departure from the norm of viewing commander and chief as inseparable was unique. The defeated nation needed not so much a scapegoat (Ludendorff), claims Hoegen, as it longed for a savior to whom people could rally, and in the turmoil of the revolution, Hindenburg filled the gap. Ludendorff's successor, Wilhelm Groener, presciently and instantly recognized the requirement and made the marshal the "moderator" of the transition from *Kaiserreich* to republic. This move facilitated the acceptance of the republic while dismissing the megalomania

of the High Command as the work of Ludendorff, allowing Hindenburg to escape the catastrophe with his reputation not only intact but also enhanced. He stood poised in 1920 to run for president as ersatz kaiser, but the Kapp Putsch changed matters, and he had to wait five years until Friedrich Ebert died. While at one time or another from 1925 to 1932, virtually all classes and parties, with the exception of the communists and the radical left, had supported Hindenburg, nonetheless, the aura of the marshal dimmed and his inviolability gradually fell apart. Hoegen's chapters on Hindenburg's presidency illustrate well the attacks and insults the old man endured.

Hoegen takes the story through Hindenburg's death, interment, and apotheosis in 1934. As he points out, even before the mortal remains had cooled, the Nazis sought to eke out a few more miles from the tired myth by ingenuously asserting that the revered marshal had designated Adolf Hitler as his successor. In reality, Hoegen points

out, the denouement had come fifteen months earlier at the Day of Potsdam, symbolized by the famous handshake between the marshal and corporal. At the citadel of Prussian militarism and resting place of Frederick the Great, Hindenburg symbolically handed over the sacred fatherland, as Ludendorff presciently noted, to the greatest demagogue of all time, leaving future generations to curse the aged marshal in his grave.

In sum, this is an excellent work on a neglected and important topic. Thoroughly researched, with copious illustrations, and clearly written, Hoegen's work illustrates how the public deceived itself by longing for a past that defied the present. While not a book for neophytes, owing to its length and assumption of a high-level knowledge of contemporary events among its audience, the work deserves a careful reading by scholars of the period and a place on the shelf of research libraries.

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

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

**Citation:** Michael B. Barrett. Review of Hoegen, Jesko von, *Der Held von Tannenberg: Genese und Funktion des Hindenburg-Mythos (1914-1934)*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25460>



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