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Kirsten Zirkel. *Vom Militaristen zum Pazifisten: General Berthold von Deimling - eine politische Biographie.* Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2008. 272 pp. EUR 29.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89861-898-4.

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Harbinger of Peace

With *Vom Militaristen zum Pazifisten*, Kirsten Zirkel has written the only extensive biography of General Berthold von Deimling, a fitting subject for Klartext's series on war and peace research. Zirkel aims to rescue Deimling from (relative) obscurity. Deimling has not been treated in any serious manner in accounts of the imperial army and the First World War; indeed, some works do not mention him at all. Hew Strachan's several works on the war ignore Deimling's contribution, including the important volume *The First World War* (2004). In other works, Deimling appears only in passing, and then only as the commander of the sector in which poison gas was first used by the Germans (such as in Holger Herwig's *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary*, 1997). If he is mentioned at all, as Zirkel points out, it is for his incendiary role during the Zabern Affair in 1913 (p. 73).

Deimling does not deserve such obscurity. He was the commander of the 2nd Field Regiment in southwestern Africa under the leadership of Lothar von Trotha. Deimling's precipitous attack at the battle of Waterberg in August 1904 prevented Trotha from completing the planned encirclement of the Herero and drove them instead into the desert. There, thousands died of thirst or were slain by the pursuing Germans, including Deimling's regiment. Zirkel is quick to acknowledge that Trotha's plan was in any case questionable. What might have happened to those same Herero had they been completely surrounded? In any case, both Deimling's rash-

ness and his ruthlessness garnered him acknowledgment. He returned to Germany as a "colonial expert," and the Kaiser ennobled him for his efforts.

After his promotion to general, Deimling took command of the 58th Infantry Brigade stationed in Mülhausen (Mulhouse) in December 1907. Zirkel credits Deimling's provocative stance vis-à-vis the local population and his frequent fiery, militaristic speeches with gaining Deimling the attention of the Kaiser again, who subsequently promoted Deimling to command of the XV Army Corps in Strasbourg in April 1913. From this perch, Deimling provoked, persecuted, and insulted local inhabitants by staging, for example, daily parade marches through the city of Strasbourg. With such a superior, it is small wonder that a young lieutenant in the nearby town of Zabern would advise his recruits not to hesitate to use bayonets in the case of altercations with civilians, whom he labeled *Wackes*, an insult in the local dialect. Deimling not only created the atmosphere; he escalated the crisis once it broke, according to Zirkel's analysis.

What makes Deimling even more fascinating and relevant for peace research is that he made the unlikely transition from general in the Kaiser's army to champion of international reconciliation—from a so-called *Pazifistenfresser* (someone who had pacifists for lunch) to pacifist. Zirkel's chapters on Africa and Zabern are compact and convincingly argued, based largely on primary sources that have not been previously explored. The

heart of the book, however, is Zirkel's exploration of the motives for this striking change. How did the man who, in a speech in 1911, had railed against peace as an "energizing idea" (p. 75) become a spokesman for arms reduction?

As one might expect in the case of such a dramatic shift in personality, the most obvious causes were psychological. The army forced Deimling into retirement on May 22, 1917. Deimling blamed plotters in the Supreme Command who were anxious to dismiss anyone who did not agree with them. Other, more compelling reasons are obvious in Zirkel's account. Deimling was not particularly good at following orders. His departures from plans, despite his successes like that at Fort Vaux in 1916, often led to chaos and enormous casualties. Long after the war, he was known as the "Butcher of Ypres" for his role as commander of the XV Army Corps in that 1914 engagement. By 1917, his superiors had seen enough.

Still, his dismissal was not sufficient to lead Deimling to take the dramatic step toward pacifism. Rather, it was the military collapse of Germany and the onset of revolution that finally moved Deimling in that direction. The collapse of the monarchy, writes Zirkel, was the "blow [*Paukenschlag*] that shook Deimling's spiritual and social orientation to its foundations" (p. 124). Zirkel explains many of Deimling's actions—in southwestern Africa, in Strasbourg, and on the western front—as expressions of his unflagging loyalty to the Kaiser. With the Kaiser gone, and the army having turned its back on him, the action-oriented former officer devoted his enormous energy to a new cause: the republic and peace.

Zirkel does a fine job of connecting Deimling's biography to the larger context of the Weimar Republic. Deimling is certainly an unusual character, as Zirkel makes clear, but he was no lone voice crying in the wilderness. She credits Deimling with building amongst the pro-republic *Reichsbanner* a "Front-Generation" consciousness that contributed to its solidarity. Deimling spoke on behalf of various pacifist groups over the years but always maintained the importance of a seemingly paradoxical "able-bodied pacifism" (*wehrhafte Pazifis-*

mus)—a pacifism capable of defending itself militarily.

Zirkel also occasionally extrapolates from Deimling's experiences to comment on the prospects for success not only of a pacifist movement (which seemed slight) but of Weimar democracy. He actively supported the liberal Deutsche Demokratische Partei (DDP). Zirkel points out the infighting, the internal contradictions and the frustrating weakness of similar groups in the face of threats to democracy (and peace) from the right.

With only Deimling's 1930 memoir (*Aus der alten in die neue Zeit*) and two or three very short biographical pieces to start from, Zirkel has written an impressive account of this unusual and important character. With those sources exhausted, Zirkel then accessed a wide range of archives to analyze the various phases of Deimling's career. His papers are housed at both the military archive in Freiburg and in Baden-Baden, but research on his colonial command, his engagement with the *Reichsbanner*, and his other work necessitated trips to Berlin, Koblenz, Bonn, and elsewhere.

Only in trying to frame Deimling's significance in her conclusion does Zirkel stretch beyond the limits of her evidence. She claims that Deimling's admonitions against war, his advocacy of arms reductions, and his belief in the idea of the League of Nations made him a man who was ahead of his time. According to Zirkel, Deimling "showed the path down which the Weimar Republic should have gone, in order not to make the Third Reich possible in the first place" (p. 237). But so convincing is her evidence of the personal, psychological nature of Deimling's conversion that he seems unworthy of the compliment. His pacifism could be understood as whim, his preaching as the zeal of a convert. Deimling took Hitler's early peace initiatives at face value and wrote to Hermann Göring in October 1933 of his satisfaction at hearing the *Führer* champion international reconciliation. Whether such efforts were naïve or merely tactical (Zirkel's surmise), Deimling's approach to Hitler, combined with his failure to anchor "able-bodied pacifism" in Weimar political culture, make him very much a man of, not ahead of, his time.

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