

# Rise of Nazism in Interwar Germany: Hitler's Political Rivalry with Ludendorff

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*General Erich Ludendorff, the German Empire's military ruler during the latter half of the First World War (1916-18), made a fateful attempt in the spring of 1925 to reclaim the dictatorship of Germany by participating in the presidential election.*

The election took place at that time due to the death on 28 February 1925 of president Friedrich Ebert, of the left-leaning Social Democratic Party, who had been the German leader for 6 years at the head of the Weimar government. Ebert's health was broken, in part, because of the continuous verbal attacks he had to endure from Germany's radical right.

There is no doubt that Ludendorff's intention was to retake supreme power in Germany, rebuild the military, and then embark upon a war of conquest across the European continent to reassert German dominance. He held severe contempt for social democracy and the Weimar Republic. From 1919 Ludendorff said repeatedly that he "ought never to have let myself be dismissed" by Kaiser Wilhelm II at the end of World War I, and that his desire was to "get back to power". (1)

Ludendorff's bid to regain the dictatorship was an important event in interwar German history. Should he fail and fail spectacularly, it would eliminate him as the main rival to Adolf Hitler for the extreme right in Germany, while bolstering Hitler's position within the Nazi Party. Hitler himself was actively encouraging Ludendorff to run for the presidency in 1925, as a candidate for the Nazi Party. Ludendorff had already been elected to the German

parliament (Reichstag) in December 1924 as a Nazi member of parliament (MP) for Bavaria, Germany's largest state in the south of the country.

In March 1925, shortly before the presidential election took place, Ludendorff said,

"I have just had an anxious discussion with Hitler" and "we have come to the conclusion that I should stand as the candidate of the National Socialists [Nazis]. Hitler is convinced that the risk must be run... Hitler knows perfectly well that although he has a great following in Bavaria, he can count on very few votes in north Germany and east of Berlin. On the other hand, the name of Ludendorff is well known and respected throughout Germany. In particular, the East Prussians and Silesians have been bound to me by gratitude and devotion ever since the war". (2)

Unknown to Ludendorff, Hitler was playing a cunning game here, entirely for his own benefit and ultimate goal of taking the dictatorship. Hitler possessed much shrewder political instincts than the military elite, and Ludendorff was too rash and impatient to make a politician.

Alexander Clifford, a historian who focuses on interwar European history wrote, "Hitler conceived the presidential campaign from the get-go as a sure-fire method of discrediting Ludendorff as a leadership rival. Well aware of the general's political limitations... Hitler calculated that a torrid defeat would only serve to further tarnish Ludendorff's reputation. By pushing the general to stand as a token candidate, Hitler lost nothing, but a dismal electoral performance would serve to prise more Nazi supporters away from the idea that Ludendorff was suited to a leadership role in the party". (3)

A dismal electoral performance it would turn out to be. Out of several candidates for the 1925 presidential election, Ludendorff ended comfortably in bottom position. He drew a measly 285,793 votes, less than 1.1% of the national total. For example the Communist Party of Germany candidate, Ernst Thälmann, attracted almost 2 million votes, over 6 times more than Ludendorff.

The humiliation for Ludendorff was deepened by the fact that his close army colleague, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, won the presidency as a right-wing Independent, gathering more than 14 million votes. The 77-year-old Hindenburg had pleaded with Ludendorff not to partake in the election, warning him what the outcome would be (4). Ludendorff went his own way, however.

It is ironic that Hindenburg outmatched Ludendorff in the political realm, when in the military sphere Hindenburg possessed much less military ability than the more aggressive and intelligent Ludendorff, a fact which the German public was not aware of. After the Kaiser was acquainted with Hindenburg, he said he felt him to be "wooden and unimaginative", and he described Ludendorff as "the Sergeant-Major". (5)

Hindenburg's great reputation with the German people was based on myth and legend: that the field marshal had been responsible for the German victories in the war, such as at the Battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. In reality Hindenburg, like the Kaiser, was a ceremonial figurehead during the war. Hindenburg may not have been a military genius, but he was a more stable and decent individual than Ludendorff. According to General Otto von Lossow, the overall commander of German troops in Bavaria in 1923, Ludendorff had become "a wild man" with "evil in his head". (6)

Hitler was delighted with the outcome of the 1925 presidential election. He gloated in private that Ludendorff was “finally finished” as his political rival. Of Ludendorff, Hitler said to his loyal follower Rudolf Hess,

“I would like his name to disappear if possible from the movement [Nazi Party] because he makes it harder for me to win the workers”. Hitler believed that Ludendorff was strictly a military leader, not a political one, and he wanted “only true National Socialists” near the top of the Nazi Party. (7)

The general’s political debacle was a considerable step forward for Hitler; but Ludendorff was actually finished as a force in Germany since 1923, when he began to associate with the Nazis on the streets of Munich, Bavaria’s capital city. Doing so destroyed whatever popularity Ludendorff still enjoyed with the German public, which was reflected in the presidential vote.

Yet Ludendorff was impeded, in his campaign for the presidency, due to the Nazi Party itself having hardly any money in 1925. Some Nazi officials said that the election campaign was a method in which to discredit Ludendorff (8). Nor did the general appear very often in public, or deliver any speeches in the build-up to the voting. Ludendorff had also been losing supporters on the right, because of his condemnations of Roman Catholicism from the early 1920s, which he blamed for spreading international and pacifist thinking in Germany, and which he felt to be a factor in his country’s defeat in World War I.

The few influential Nazis who supported Ludendorff in his presidential bid, such as Ernst Röhm, shifted towards Hitler after the result of the vote. With Ludendorff not a threat, Hitler no longer had a serious rival on the far-right. (9)

Perhaps there is an underlying misfortune about Ludendorff’s political demise. For if he had reclaimed the German autocracy, it would most likely have prevented Hitler’s rise to power. By 1924 and 1925 the formerly warm relationship between Ludendorff and Hitler was growing colder; and in the event of retaking power Ludendorff, a general, might well have been unwilling to hand over the reins to Hitler, a corporal.

It seems unlikely that had Ludendorff regained power in the mid-1920s, or later, that he would have proceeded to do what Hitler did – unleash genocide against Europe’s Jewish and Gypsy populations. The younger fanatics who emerge are usually worse than their elders, a truism which has stood the passage of time.

Born in 1865, a quarter of a century before Hitler, Ludendorff belonged to an older generation of Germans whose formative years occurred during the happy and generally prosperous years of Otto von Bismarck’s chancellorship (1871-90); when Germany was the dominant nation in mainland Europe, which remained the case up to the outbreak of war in 1914. Had Ludendorff’s intentions turned out to be as bad as Hitler’s, and again it is doubtful, the general would probably have refrained in any case from committing genocide, by the continued influence of moderate figures like Hindenburg in Germany.

Ludendorff was certainly a virulent anti-Semite as shown in an article he wrote in 1922, where he lamented “the strong intrusion of the Jewish people inside our borders”, and hinted at their expulsion from Germany (10). A 1925 census outlined that the population of German Jews amounted to 564,973 (11), less than 1% of the recorded total German population that year of 62,410,619.

Though Ludendorff's views are vicious enough, Hitler said outright in 1922 that he would commit genocide against Germany's entire Jewish population were he to enter high office. "If I am ever really in power, the destruction of the Jews will be my first and most important job" Hitler said, and that in order to do so he would have "gallows after gallows erected... as many of them as the traffic allows" until "Germany is cleansed of the last Jew". These words were noted by Josef Hell, a German journalist, who had asked Hitler what he would do "if he ever had full freedom of action against the Jews" (12). Hitler's disturbing remarks, which feature in John Toland's biography of the Nazi leader, reveal that Hitler had become a monster even as a young man in his early 30s.

Of Germany at this time the philosopher and scholar Noam Chomsky said,

"Well, Goebbels himself wrote about how he was influenced by the success of U.S. commercial propaganda. This was the 1920s, early 30s. They turned it into a highly refined system, which was very effective. Now it's pretty remarkable to see what happened in Germany. You go back to the 1920s. Germany was the most civilized country in the world. It was at the peak of Western civilization, and the arts and sciences, it was considered a model of democracy by political scientists. That was Germany in the 1920s. Ten years later, it was the absolute depths of human history [Nazi Germany]. Go ten years later than that, you're back to becoming a civilized society. It's a quite astonishing illustration of the capacity of organized propaganda to totally change the population, from the most civilized in the world, to the most degraded in history". (13)

Following Ludendorff's resignation as Germany's warlord in late October 1918, the only way he could have reclaimed power was at the head of a coup d'état. He participated in two coups, the Kapp Putsch of 1920 and the 1923 Nazi Beer Hall Putsch, both of which were a fiasco and that Ludendorff had not really led.

Those two putsches, which had little chance of succeeding, came too soon after the end of the war. The Western Allies, France most of all, could never have tolerated a militarist resurgence in Germany in the early or mid-1920s. The time most suitable for Ludendorff to have instigated a coup would have been around 1930, when France was weaker and the international situation more favourable to a far-right putsch, as the Great Depression was hitting Europe hard by then.

Ludendorff's complete break with Hitler came when the Nazi leader refused, for political reasons, to join in with Ludendorff's criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church. Ludendorff became contemptuous of Hitler and he wrote a pamphlet in 1931 with the headline, "Hitler's Betrayal of the German People to the Roman Pope".

By now Ludendorff had fallen out with almost everyone. He quarrelled with Crown Prince Rupprecht, a field marshal and last heir apparent to the Bavarian throne, because of the Crown Prince's belief in Roman Catholicism and ties to the church. He quarrelled with other royal family members and with German generals who were sympathetic to the Crown Prince, and as a result 37 generals signed a manifesto excluding Ludendorff from their officers associations. He quarrelled with the prominent admiral, Alfred von Tirpitz, calling the political party (German National People's Party) which he supported "a gang of perjured renegades", and the admiral never spoke to Ludendorff again. He quarrelled with his wife Margarethe and ended up divorcing her in 1925.

He quarrelled too with Hindenburg. In the summer of 1925 Hindenburg, the new president, wrote to Ludendorff that he could no longer make the trip to see the latter at his home at Ludwigshöhe near Munich, because of the responsibilities he had as president. Ludendorff “foamed with rage” at the rejection and was also deeply hurt; he spoke of Hindenburg thereafter only in bitter language.

Ludendorff had previously insisted, “Come what may, in the eyes of the world Hindenburg and I must always stand together and be and remain the pattern of German loyalty and German unity” (14). Now that unity was broken, which further served Hitler’s cause.

In late August 1927, when Ludendorff attended the dedication of the Tannenberg Memorial, he created a scene by refusing to stand beside Hindenburg (15). Infuriated, Hindenburg left before Ludendorff spoke at the ceremony. After the dedication, Ludendorff was shunned by all of his former military colleagues. He ended up leaving by himself and made his way to his car. Neither did Ludendorff make an impression in Berlin as a Nazi deputy. He cut a lonely figure in parliament and his tenure as a Nazi Party MP ended silently in 1928.

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## Notes

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3 Ibid., p. 108

4 Goodspeed, Ludendorff, p. 305

5 Ibid., p. 188

6 Ibid., p. 297

7 Clifford, Hindenburg, Ludendorff and Hitler, p. 106

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