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LUDENDORFF: STRATEGIST

BY

**Lieutenant Colonel William A. Jones
United States Army**

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92-14452



92 6 01 1992

UNCLASSIFIED

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED			1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS		
2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY			3. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A		
2b. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE					
4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)			5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		
6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE		6b. OFFICE SYMBOL (if applicable)	7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION		
6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) ROOT HALL, BLDG 122 CARLISLE, PA 17013-5050			7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		
8a. NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION		8b. OFFICE SYMBOL (if applicable)	9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER		
8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)			10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS		
			PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.	TASK NO.
					WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.
11. TITLE (Include Security Classification) LUDENDORFF: STRATEGIST					
12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) LTC WILLIAM A. JONES					
13a. TYPE OF REPORT STUDY PROJECT		13b. TIME COVERED FROM _____ TO _____		14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) 92/3/25	
15. PAGE COUNT 38					
16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION					
17. COSATI CODES			18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)		
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP			
19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) One of the techniques to understanding the successful choreography of the elements of strategy is the study of the great strategists of history. This worthy endeavor, however, should not be limited to the study of success. Many significant lessons concerning the components of strategy can only be derived from studying the examples of great strategic failure. Erich Ludendorff failed as a strategic leader. This case study traces the genesis of his failure in the context of his inability to properly coordinate the elements of strategy.					
20. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS			21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION Unclassified		
22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL COL(RET) ARTHUR F. LYKKE, JR.			22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) 717) 243-6126		22c. OFFICE SYMBOL AWCAB

USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

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LUDENDORFF: STRATEGIST

by

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A-1	

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR William A. Jones, LTC, USA

TITLE: Ludendorff: Strategist

FORMAT: Individual Study Project

Date: 25 March 1992 PAGES: 36 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

One of the techniques to understanding the successful choreography of the elements of strategy is the study of the great strategists of history. This worthy endeavor, however, should not be limited to the study of success. Many significant lessons concerning the components of strategy can only be derived from studying the examples of great strategic failure. Erich Ludendorff failed as a strategic leader. This case study traces the genesis of his failure in the context of his inability to properly coordinate the elements of strategy. It is an analysis of the process which led to his failure. An appreciation of his background and heritage reveals the nature of his values and prejudices which accompanied him to the strategic level. An analysis of his strategic development links his character with his personal experiences at the different levels of leadership. Finally an essay of his work as a strategic leader is diagrammed in terms of his character, his development and the strategic environment of the times. Collectively, this diversified group of inputs, some complimentary, others often in direct competition, serve to identify the base from which his strategic decisions were made. The value of this study becomes apparent as the errors suddenly become glaring and the student finds himself learning from the strategic solution that in fact led to failure.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to effectively function at the strategic level of leadership can be predicated by one's personal preparation for the transition to this level. A significant element of this preparation is the study of strategic leaders. Not surprisingly, the military student has a natural tendency to gravitate towards the truly successful strategists while participating in this endeavor. Masters of strategy succeed. But history may argue that some of the more meaningful lessons can be gained from studying the dynamics that led to strategic failure.

Some strategists consider Erich Ludendorff as the greatest of all the leaders of the First World War and one whose accomplishments approached Napoleonic dimension.¹ Yet Erich Ludendorff failed as a strategic leader. The components of strategic success seem to transcend history with only minor modification. Ludendorff's failure, as in the case of most strategic failures, resulted not from ignorance of the components of strategy but from his misuse of them. This case study analyzes Ludendorff's inability to array these components into a successful sequence. The process used in the study is designed to simplify this analysis.

We begin with a biographical sketch of Ludendorff. This effort extends beyond a simple listing of the historical events of his life. Rather, it is a biographical search for the basis of his thinking, a painting of his inner core. This portrait of

Ludendorff is essential to understanding the source and strength of his prejudices, the essence of his heritage and the diversity of his experiences. The identification of these characteristics is critical to the process in that each may have contributed to his strategic thought and thus could provide insights concerning his logic.

Next we trace his evolution as a strategist. This step blends the historical events which shaped his personality with his exposure to the different dimensions of strategic activity. In this analysis we identify common threads in his strategic thought which reappear at all levels. We observe Ludendorff's reliance on these components of previous successes to assist him in creating strategic vision at the national level.

The final element of the study is the evaluation of Ludendorff as a strategist. This review will not recount his successes. It will focus on his failure. His inability to solve the strategic equation will be templated against the knowledge gained from the first two elements of the study. It is this analysis of failure that increases the student's appreciation of the complexity of strategic thought and the correct relationship of its internal forces.

BIOGRAPHY

Erich Frederick Wilhelm Ludendorff was born on April 9, 1865 at Kruszevnia in Posen located in what was then Prussian Poland.

His family was considered middle class, his father being a rural estate agent. In analyzing the forces which impacted on the development of this individual, these relatively humble beginnings are significant. Bismark's Germany was always conscious of class and nobility. The officer corps of the German Army was primarily an aristocratic organization. It is no small irony, that against all odds this man of simple birth would rise to lead his nation from a position normally reserved for "men of noble blood".²

Ludendorff's early years witnessed dramatic political and military events. During this time Germany fought both the Austria-Prussia and Franco-Prussian Wars. Its leadership watched in anguish as the military alliance of Russia and France became a reality in 1893. Ludendorff spent a great deal of his developmental years studying and observing Germany's preparations for the next war. Through this exposure, he became dedicated to the existence of his fatherland. This nationalistic fervor inspired a devotion to cause and an attention to detail rarely seen in men of his age.

Throughout his educational development Ludendorff's instructors identified him as a rare student possessing an exceptional mind. He consistently remained at the head of his class and was considered an exceptional student who was not one to accept compromise.³ He attended primarily military schools beginning with the Cadet School at Plon and continuing at the "Kriegsakademie" an institution developed by Moltke to groom

future general officers.⁴ Ludendorff's pride of his military education is demonstrated in his remark in later years that " he had never read a serious book that did not deal with military matters".⁵ Interestingly, this same single dimension of his education would later be described as a contributing factor to his lack of strategic vision concerning non military matters. His academic achievement and devotion to his work, however, labeled him as a prospect for the German General Staff.

After a brief experience in the field as a commander, Ludendorff joined the German General Staff in Berlin. This appointment is without question the most significant event in his developing career. This assignment placed him under the tutelage of Alfred von Schlieffen, the Chief of the General Staff and the author of the Schlieffen Plan. This document was the only plan in existence for the defense of Germany. Ludendorff quickly became a disciple of this military strategist. His reverence for the man and his concepts are well documented. His description of Schlieffen as "one of the greatest soldiers who ever lived", clearly demonstrates the passion he felt for this leader.⁶ Tracing the development of Ludendorff reveals that this influence became a common thread in the decisions and actions that he pursued for the remainder of his career.

The onset of the Great War again found Ludendorff in the field. As a brigade commander, Ludendorff had trained his men for the upcoming struggle. This experience allowed him to view the parts of the German war machine which were to execute the

strategic vision that he had helped to create. He was generally appalled at what he saw. This snapshot of German training techniques, existing force structure and class struggles within the Army, made a lasting impression on him. He later recalled on this experience as he revised the tactics of the Army and its training philosophy. Interestingly, these tactical lessons would later influence many of his strategic decisions. As fate would have it, his unit assignment to the Second Army placed him at a critical node to the execution of the Schlieffen Plan.

Liege, Belgium presented a formidable obstacle to German success. The Schlieffen Plan dictated that "the heart of France lies between Brussels and Paris".⁷ Liege lay at the entrance to a narrow passageway between Holland and the Ardennes. Moltke's derivation of the Schlieffen Plan required the entire German right wing to pass through this gap. Shortly after the beginning of hostilities, Ludendorff arrived at this site in time to find the German advance halted. Realizing the criticality of this area to the success of the strategic effort, he intervened immediately. Through his stubborn determination, coupled with Belgian miscommunication and a touch of luck, the fortress was taken with little resistance. The seemingly ease with which he accomplished this feat made Ludendorff an instant hero to his nation. For his actions, the Kaiser awarded him the "Pour le Merite", Germany's highest award for valor.⁸ More importantly, however, this victory identified him to the General Staff as a military commander whose talents could be used elsewhere.

The victory at Liege and the subsequent advance of German forces in the west provided a significant contrast to the operations ongoing in the east. As predicted, Germany would have to fight a two front war. The Schlieffen Plan had accurately considered this dilemma. The essence of the plan provided for an initial defense against Russia, allowing for the consolidation of the resources necessary for the defeat of the more prepared France. Incredibly, in the early stages of the war, the potential existed for the collapse of the entire eastern front as the German Eighth Army began preparations for the abandonment of Eastern Prussia. Moltke needed an officer capable of quick decisive action that understood the complexity of the role this front played in the overall strategic plan. Based on the events at Liege, General Ludendorff was the logical choice. He would become Chief of Staff to the newly appointed Army commander, General Paul von Hindenberg.

Ludendorff and Hindenberg met for the first time on a train taking them to the eastern front and their new command. Both men had been born in Posen. Ludendorff was the commoner, Hindenberg the aristocrat. The logic of this union became inescapable. Hindenberg, the polished aristocrat, was an elderly patient man whom the German people would easily identify as a credible commander. Ludendorff, on the contrary, was a young nervous perfectionist, easily excitable, who thrived on activity. It was clear from their first meeting what their respective roles would be. Hindenberg would be the Prussian figurehead for the command

and provide the stability necessary for success. By virtue of his rank and seniority, he would ensure that his junior partner would solve the military equation without interference.⁹

This marriage of personalities would endure the entire war as each played his role to perfection. The synergy they created is perhaps best expressed by Ludendorff himself when he wrote years later, "For four years the Field Marshall and I worked together like one man in perfect harmony".¹⁰ Equally revealing is the older Hindenberg's affection for his chief of staff as he describes his "superhuman capacity for work and untiring resolution".¹¹

On August 23, 1914 Hindenberg and Ludendorff arrived at the Eastern front. Ludendorff had issued his initial orders from the train. At the end of one week in the theater, together with their able operations officer, LTC Max Hoffmann, they had destroyed the 2nd Russian Army at Tannenberg and stabilized the front. The battle of Tannenberg, named after a hamlet where Teutonic knights had suffered defeat at the hands of Poles and Lithuanians in 1410, was a stunning success accurately described as one of the few battles of the war which resulted in undisputed victory for one of the combatants.¹²

Tannenberg cemented Hindenberg's place in the hearts of the German people and reinforced Ludendorff's reputation for genius. The remaining victories in the east strategically equalled or even surpassed the battle of Tannenberg, but none served so important a role in elevating the prestige and status of these

men. The Hindenberg-Ludendorff team would soon seem invincible to its people and, unfortunately for Germany, to the combatants.

As chief of Staff of the newly created Ninth Army, Ludendorff's victories in the east began with the Battle of Mansurian Lakes in southeast Prussia and the defeat of the Russian First Army. Two weeks later the entire Ninth Army arrived in southwest Poland. This incredible feat included the organization and transfer of over 200,000 men, their horses and equipment, field guns, ammunition and basic supplies, across 600 miles by rail.¹³ This magnificent example of staff coordination and leadership stopped both the Russian advance and the threat it presented to Silesia. For their herculean effort and its critical results, General Erich von Falkenhayen, Moltke's successor, promoted Hindenberg to Field Marshall and Ludendorff to Lieutenant General. He then placed Hindenberg in charge of the entire effort in the east and made Ludendorff his Chief of Staff.

For the next two years Ludendorff and Hindenberg would struggle to bring an end to the war in the east. Although their military victories were numerous and impressive, none had ended in strategic decision. This result of this effort was a strategic stalemate.

Ludendorff considered the stalemate in the east a direct consequence of the beliefs of the German Chief of Staff, General Falkenhayen. The latter had determined that military victory in the west was not attainable. His strategy was to convince the

British and the French of this premise by fighting a war of attrition so horrible and indecisive, that they would see the futility of the effort and move towards peace. The conclusion of hostilities in this theater would then allow the transfer of resources to the east and the defeat of Russia. In order to achieve the needed stability, he was unwilling to accept risk in either theater. This strategy allowed the war and its overwhelming drain on the finite resources of Germany to continue. Ludendorff's concept to end the war was in complete juxtaposition to this concept.

Ludendorff firmly believed, given the forces he required, he could strategically defeat the Russians and thus close the eastern front. Armies would then be transferred to the western front creating the necessary force ratios for the successful implementation of the Schlieffen Plan. The commitment of both these men to their beliefs resulted in a bitter feud at the highest levels of the German war effort. With Hindenberg's continuous support and the public outcry against the ongoing horrors of Verdun, Ludendorff was able to slowly erode the strength of his philosophical enemy. In August of 1916 Rumania unexpectedly entered the war against Germany. This action translated to the German nation that the neutral countries of Europe were convinced of Germany's defeat and would now begin to align against her.¹⁴ This astonishing turn of events sealed the fate of the German Chief of Staff. Ludendorff was summoned to a meeting with the Kaiser.

Hindenberg and Ludendorff took charge of the German war effort in August of 1916. The situation facing Germany was grim. The British blockade continued to devastate the German homeland and the overall quality of life. The British Army was attacking fiercely on the Somme. The Italians were severely testing the Austrians. The Romanians had opened another front just as the Russians were beginning to show signs of activity in the east. As if the complexities of this military dilemma were not enough, it became apparent to these newly anointed strategic players that international and domestic politics would now impact their strategic planning.¹⁵ This was a new dimension of strategy for the commoner Ludendorff. He would struggle with it for the remainder of the war.

Hindenberg was now the Chief of the General Staff. Ludendorff refused the title of Second Chief of Staff and decided that he would be the "First Quartermaster General", a subtle statement that his role would be more visible to the alliance than before.¹⁶ Although these titles and the responsibility linked to them did not in any way mean to change the politics of the German nation, it was not long before a new political order had been established. The Kaiser became the Commander in Chief of the military in name only. His role was now to provide a shield for Ludendorff, the commoner, from the aristocracy of the German political system.¹⁷

The activity and work ethic that Ludendorff had demonstrated at every stage of his career was replicated at the national

level. Within hours of his appointment he made personnel changes, altered staff procedures, and installed new communication networks. He conducted initial discussions concerning the merits of submarine warfare just two days after his appointment. After one week, he unilaterally decided that the struggle at Verdun would be broken off. At first glance, the diversity and magnitude of these decisions seems overpowering. Tracing his education, his successes, and his experiences from student to First Quartermaster General, however, allows us to realize that all his training, ambitions and his beliefs made him the one man in Germany capable for the task at hand. In late 1916 Germany needed a cure for failure. Ludendorff was the logical choice.¹⁸

The beginning of 1917 witnessed a dramatic change in the German situation. Germany went on the defensive in the west. There were rumors of possible peace negotiations with the Russians. Despite his inexperience at the national level, Ludendorff had been hard at work. He had initiated a set of new and controversial labor laws, begun a program of rural settlement, and installed a system which addressed disease control. Additionally, he launched a massive propaganda effort at the German people garnishing their support for the war.¹⁹ All these actions mirrored the civil work that he had done on the eastern front in the occupied countries. Impressive as this list may seem, the change that was about to occur would rattle the constitutional structure of the homeland itself and provide a

signal to the world. Deliberately and methodically, Hindenberg and Ludendorff set forth to undermine the credibility of Germany's Chancellor, Bethman Hollweg. This struggle was very similar to the earlier battle with the Chief of Staff, Falkenhayen. Predictably, the results were the same.

Hindenberg and Ludendorff had long ago ceased believing in the ability of the German political system to manage the war effort. They had come to believe, not in any small part to the enormity and speed of their success and fame, that they were outside the constraints of the German political bureaucracy. Their elevation to the highest echelons of the German State coupled with their reception by the people of Germany, convinced them that their beliefs were those of the people. They had no time for arguments concerning diplomacy or governmental procedure. The Kaiser had the constitutional duty to bring harmony to the military and the political equation.²⁰ He had not curtailed the initiatives of his chancellor to conduct peace negotiation discussions in the German Reichstag. These discussions were in direct contrast to Ludendorff's propaganda program to justify the current war effort. Additionally, it struck at the very thesis of the Schlieffen doctrine concerning the need for additional land to offset the threat of a two front war.²¹ The removal of the chancellor became critical to Ludendorff's perception of the need for a unified approach to governmental policy. In July 1917 the Kaiser dismissed the Chancellor and the unannounced dictatorship of Germany by

Ludendorff began.

Having solved the political crisis at home, Ludendorff focused his effort back to finding the military solution to the war. By 1918 Russia had left the war. The defensive tactics of 1917 would no longer suffice. The entry of the United States into the war promised the introduction of unlimited resources which Germany could not match. The solution had to be quick and it had to be military. The key was to solve the riddle of trench warfare and its inherent advantage to the defender. Ludendorff firmly believed that the attack was the only decisive form of combat and the true measure of military supremacy.²² Having developed what he correctly thought was the solution to the tactical dilemma in the west he launched the German offensive of 1918.

Codenamed "Michael", the German offensive began on March 21, 1918.²³ This dramatic action totally surprised the British and the French. Ludendorff had become the leader of Germany and the characteristics of the German final assault matched those of its creator. The preparation for the attack had been conducted in almost total secrecy. Every detail had been checked and rechecked. The staff work which supported this effort was seemingly endless. The soul of the plan was one of "burning restlessness and physical activity".²⁴ Maneuver would replace trench warfare. The pursuit of its goal, peace negotiations under Germany's terms, was to be relentless and uncompromising.

Ludendorff became obsessed with his search for the one

decisive victory which would end the war. The offensive resulted in a series of spectacular tactical events but no strategic reward. This incessant series of actions gradually drained the resources of the German war machine. Yet he persisted. After all, compromise had not brought success in the past. "His iron and obsessive will in the end blinded his military reason".²⁵ The German offensive and for all practical discussion, the German war effort ended in the summer of 1918. Germany's strategic leader had led her to defeat.

STRATEGIC EVOLUTION

An analysis of the evolution of Ludendorff's strategic development must begin with a military component, namely, the Schlieffen Plan. His belief in this plan as the strategic solution to Germany's military dilemma extended beyond the objective of the sequential defeat of France and Russia. His faith in the plan was fervent and it grew with him. "By temperament, influence, and training, Ludendorff was a complete believer in Count Schlieffen's military ideas".²⁶ Throughout his career as well as in his writings, reference to the Schlieffen Plan and its components provided a continuity of strategic thought and commitment.

The Schlieffen Plan's precept was merely a logical assessment of Germany's strategic relationship to the rest of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Germany could not

fight a two front war for an extended period of time. Outnumbered and possessing limited resources, a two front war translated into a war of attrition. Germany's enemies would certainly outlast her. By its nature, France provided the greatest threat at the onset of the war. Russia's vastness made the concentration of forces and the required decisive results difficult to attain. France's demise would be brought about by a series of crushing defeats emanating from the maneuver of large armies against her flank and rear. Decisive victory was a key term. "For him as for von Schlieffen, a victory must be crushingly decisive to be worth a campaign".²⁷ Ludendorff's incessant quest for this decisive victory would ultimately lead to his failure and the defeat of Germany. Not surprisingly, Ludendorff's first political lesson was linked to this plan.

Throughout his career, Ludendorff struggled with the complexity of the relationship of the military and its civilian master. The basis for this philosophical dilemma was simple. If the government had determined that the Army was to play a role in the attainment of national goals, it was inconceivable to him that the same government would provide anything less in resources than what the military prescribed. If the particular goal set by the politicians was the security of the nation, the logic of meeting the Army's demands seemed indisputable.²⁸ In 1912, Ludendorff believed that Germany's preparation for war personified this philosophical contradiction. The successful execution of the Schlieffen Plan required a larger army. The

aristocracy remained reluctant to expand the army for fear of losing their control of the officer corps. The debate raged between the War Ministry and the General Staff. Ludendorff, unable to compromise on the criticality of this situation, became politically involved. This act represented a break in the traditional protocol of the aristocracy and would not be tolerated. He was dismissed from the General Staff.

Ludendorff's return to prestige found him on the eastern front. The tenets of the Schlieffen Plan calling for the orderly retreat to the Vistula and a subsequent defense could no longer be achieved. This dire situation provided the world its first glimpse of the strategic brilliance of Erich Ludendorff. In forty-eight hours he reoriented the focus, direction and intent of an entire army and launched it into battle against an unexpected foe.²⁹ This feat replicated Schlieffen's principles of maneuver and mass against the enemy's lines of communication. This decisive victory was immediately followed by what is considered by some as the apex of Ludendorff's strategic military brilliance in the east.

Despite the enormity of the defeat suffered at Tannenberg, Russia's seemingly endless wealth of people and resources continued to cause warranted concern. New threats to Silesia, a vital piece of the fatherland, emerged. Surprisingly, the German Ninth Army met this threat with a retreat. This deliberate move, crafted by Ludendorff, proved merely to be a pause as he searched for an area in which to gain the initiative. Using lateral

railway lines inside the German frontier for mobility, Ludendorff shifted his forces to drive a wedge between the advancing armies. Attacking each separately, he ultimately defeated in detail a much larger force. This action terminated with the battle of Lodz.

The result of this Napoleonic plan and its flawless execution was the occupation of western Poland and the halt of the Russian advance into Germany. Years later Liddell Hart defined this campaign as one of the "classic masterpieces of all military history".³⁰ Ironically this success convinced Ludendorff that victory in the east was now possible and he pressed for forces to be removed from the west. As shown earlier, the repeated denial of this request was the genesis of the feud between Ludendorff and the German General staff.

The stalemate in the east afforded Ludendorff the opportunity to expand his strategic development beyond military action and thoughts. It was during this time that he began to work feverishly in the civil activities of western Poland. Ludendorff had decided that the people of the conquered lands should contribute to the German war effort in general. He organized the area into sectors and appointed people to oversee his efforts. Through these surrogates, he levied taxes, developed natural resources, and became involved in banking regulation and direction. He dictated the requirements to the industrial leaders of the area and focused their efforts as he saw fit. This effort erroneously convinced him of his abilities

to manage the civil aspects of a nation. For although the area he managed was vast, approximating the size of France, it did not provide him the challenges associated with the intricacies of political debate or opposition. Perhaps equally important, this work blinded him as to the relative unimportance of this land to the overall strategic objectives of Germany. Later, this experience influenced him as he insisted on the continued annexation of this land in order to exploit nonexistent resources. This effort, aimed at bolstering Germany's war making capability, served to delay peace efforts with Russia. History would judge this as a strategic error which in essence denied Ludendorff the very resources that he sought to gain.³¹

For the moment, however, the results in the east although intoxicating to the German public, were strategically indecisive. Ludendorff soon realized that this very situation was what the Schlieffen plan had hoped to avoid. Again miscalculating, he contended that the lack of public support for additional armies was not the fault of the German people but due to the lack of strategic vision brought on by the "incompetence and corruption of the politician".³² This continued lack of trust for politicians in general, as well as his lack of appreciation for the role of politics in strategy formulation, accompanied him to his next position at the seat of the German government.

Ludendorff's beginnings as the leader of all Germany demonstrate an acute military brilliance coupled with a political naivete. The inability to blend the military, political,

economic and diplomatic components of strategy is perhaps his greatest strategic fault. Moreover, the nature of his leadership position demanded a capability to manage and balance the intricacies of all the elements of strategy. Ludendorff did not possess this talent. "Ludendorff the soldier, himself began to enter the world of diplomacy, for which he was inadequately equipped".³³

One of the first strategic debates that Ludendorff encountered at the national level was the question on the use of unrestricted submarine warfare. Its implementation all but ensured the entry of the United States into the war against Germany. The military component of the debate was basic. The use of this tactic erroneously predicted the rapid demise of England. The diplomatic issue was far more complex. The threat of the implementation of this tactic not only fostered the international community's disbelief in the German portrayal of the Entente as the aggressor but it caused the United States to be unsympathetic to Germany's humanitarian needs. The strategic decision to implement this element of warfare is well documented by the historians. The mechanics which drove Ludendorff to make this strategic blunder cannot be attributed merely to faulty estimates by the Navy. A more thoughtful analysis combines the naval misguided enthusiasm with a developed distrust of Germany's politicians and a limited education concerning international politics.³⁴ A similar miscalculation concerning the eastern front was soon to follow.

In late 1916 the possibility of peace with Russia came into being. The success of the negotiations balanced on the sensitive question concerning the occupied lands of Poland. The German General Governor of Warsaw recommended that an independent state with irrefutable political ties to Germany be created. His proposal included the use of Polish soldiers and resources to supplement the German war effort. Predictably, any proposal which did not return these lands to Russian control was unacceptable to the Russian government.

Ludendorff's thirst for additional resources to support his decisive military victory, blurred his vision as to the sensitivity of these issues as well as the potential they possessed. Peace with Russia would have permitted the concentration of forces in the west that he so desperately desired. In backing the proposal of the Governor General, Ludendorff effectively eliminated any chance for an early peace on the eastern front. Once again, "in the complicated and unfamiliar world of politics and diplomacy, Hindenberg and Ludendorff stumbled badly".³⁵

The inability of Ludendorff to grasp the intricacies of this particular situation and the role that diplomacy could play in gaining the strategic goals of his nation is difficult to explain. This situation seems to transcend the simple answer of a soldier being unable to evaluate the parameters of international politics. Paradoxically, it appears the greater the requirement on Ludendorff to deal with these intangibles, the

less was his proficiency. One author attributed this lack of ability to his beginnings noting that, "Ludendorff perhaps felt the political limitations to his authority more keenly than an aristocrat".³⁶ Regardless of its genesis, Ludendorff did not duplicate this strategic flaw in his application and understanding of military matters at the onset of his realm as a national leader.

Ludendorff correctly determined after his ascent to leadership, that Germany's economic and political situation precluded speculative military action. He immediately set out to correct this through the introduction of a comprehensive program which reorganized the German industrial effort and the rewriting of liberal laws concerning mandatory conscription. His goal was to increase the output of desperately needed munitions, supplies and manpower. This broad array of domestic actions and structural changes, although implemented very quickly, needed time to mature. Unfortunately the military threats which existed in the west and in the south demanded an immediate military response. Ludendorff's response to this time sensitive dilemma was masterful in design and brilliant in its execution. Ironically, the consequence of these same actions marked the beginning of a decline in his strategic thinking.

After visiting the western front in late 1916, Ludendorff accurately determined that Germany could not afford to continue offensive actions in that theater. He knew that the Entente was planning a massive offensive later in the spring of 1917. His

reaction to these circumstances was to develop a new defensive philosophy with regards to trench warfare. This initiative prompted a general retreat to prepared positions along the Hindenberg or Siegfried Line. This unprecedented change in the tactics of the war caused the offensive to fail miserably. The defeat was devastating to French morale. Its army convulsed and mutinied almost bringing an unexpected end to the war.³⁷ The introduction of new tactics had caused this stunning victory. It was immediately followed by an even more masterful military feat.

Employing only six reserve divisions, due to the aforementioned crippling domestic difficulties, Ludendorff maneuvered and employed his armies to successive victories in the east. The sites of these battles were Riga and Caporetta. New tactics were again employed resulting in the halt of Russian activity for the remainder of the war and the removal of the Italian threat to the Austrian allies. Years later, Liddell Hart accurately described this sequence of military actions as one of the most remarkable military feats in the history of war.³⁸

The tactics used at Riga and Caporetta were the newly created "Hutier Tactics", named after General Oskar von Hutier, the commander of the 8th German Army.³⁹ The success of these new tactics layered upon the French debacle in the 1917 offensive created an illusion of victory in Ludendorff's mind. His tactics had worked and he now began to search for a strategy within which to implement them. This was a complete reversal in the type of strategic thinking which had brought him success in the past. He

had found the means to impact on the war. His vision as to what these means could conclude was incomplete. He only knew his solution would be a military one.

Russia had collapsed and the long sought after forces necessary to launch the decisive offensive were finally available. The Americans had yet to arrive. "It was the Schlieffen Plan again; a gamble under acute pressure of time".⁴⁰ The strategy was simply to use the new tactics against the British and the French. There were no specific strategic goals or objectives. There were no political or diplomatic plans or activities linked to this effort. The aim was to break through the enemy lines. Ludendorff's own words perhaps best describe the illusion:

"Owing to the breakdown of Russia, the military situation was more favorable to us on New Year's 1918 than one could ever have expected. As in 1914 and 1915, we could think of deciding the war by an attack on land. Numerically we had never been so strong in comparison with our enemies."⁴¹

In March of 1918 Germany launched her last offensive of the war. It was a remarkable tactical success resulting in a breach of the enemy lines some 40 miles in length. Similar breakthroughs would occur all across the front. "Michael was intended to be the single, war deciding effort of 1918".⁴² Instead its tactical success expended the remaining resources of the German nation and stripped it of its will to fight. Tragically, the purpose of the campaign had been discussed only in tactical terms. The lack of a strategic goal essentially

eliminated the ability to exploit its initial success as each individual battle became its own entity. The clarity of vision provided to the armies of the east in years before never focused. The "Zweck", or predetermined end which Michael Howard defines as Clausewitz's requirement for the expenditure of strategic effort, did not exist.⁴³ Thus the synergistic effect of repeated tactical victories was absent. Equally inconsequential was the political and diplomatic contribution to this effort. There was no linkage to the strategic forces that Ludendorff controlled. He had not balanced the strategic equation and it marred his evolution as a strategist.

STRATEGIST

Any analysis of Ludendorff the strategist must concentrate on the last two years of the war. Albeit some of his greatest military achievements occurred before this time, only with his ascension to the national level of leadership can one evaluate the quality of his effort in dealing with the various components of strategy. At this level he ultimately failed. The relationship that he created between tactics and strategy is the military component of his strategic examination. The political component can only be his inability to blend all the forces of strategy available to the national leader.

The decline of strategic thought in Germany was certainly assisted by Ludendorff's reversal of the traditional roles of

tactics and strategy. Norman Stone's account of Ludendorff's strategic guidance for the implementation of the offensive in 1918 provides a vivid example of this illogical phenomena.

"We'll just blow a hole in the middle.
The rest will follow of its own accord".⁴⁴

When one considers that a repeated dilemma facing the military leaders of this war was the rapid loss of control spawned by the new technology and the ferocity of fighting, this lack of focus seems incomprehensible. Even at its extreme, the logic that individual tactical victories could somehow merge into a strategic decision without a hint of connectivity seems amateurish at best. Clausewitz had stated that "tactics was the doctrine of the use of armed forces in battles, strategy, the doctrine of the use of individual battles for the purpose of war".⁴⁵ At the root of Ludendorff's strategic thinking lay the violation of these basic definitions.

The origins of this type of thought can perhaps be traced to Ludendorff's Prussian background and his constant search for the Schlieffen solution. Dennis Showalter, in his discussion of German Grand Strategy, argued that Prussian history fostered the reversal of tactics supporting a strategic end. He explains that the methodology of preferring the tactical solution can be attributed to the constant need for Prussia to fight a series of limited wars to preserve her existence. Historically, the limited wars and the resulting peace were the result of quick, decisive victories, hence the Schlieffen Plan for the defense of Germany.⁴⁶ Ludendorff's perception of the relative criticality

of the operational art to the success of the national goal could have easily been distorted by his development in this environment.

The unique nature of the First World War also assisted in distorting the combatants view of the relationship between tactics and strategy. Trench warfare and its inherent stagnation certainly blurred strategic thinking on both sides of the wire. The breakthrough of the line became the incessant goal of both armies. This became achievable only as the result of innovative tactical thought supported by the understanding of rapid technological advances. Michael Geyer described this strategic dilemma in his analysis of the impact of technology on German strategy:

"Calculated operations were the victim of the discrepancy between ideological strategic intent and the performance-oriented use of force, and this made clear formulation of an objective impossible".⁴⁷

Ludendorff fell prey to the frustrating nature of the western front and coupled with his belief that Germany could not survive a protracted war much longer, expanded this concept to its extreme when he stated:

"Tactics had to be considered before purely strategical objects which it is futile to pursue unless tactical success is possible. A strategical plan which ignores the tactical factor is foredoomed to failure".⁴⁸

Ludendorff's pursuit of the tactical solution preempted his strategic application of this device once he obtained it.

Empirically convinced that his tactics would now succeed, he relentlessly applied them in search of a strategic conclusion. He did not succeed. "Ludendorff came to grief because his tactical innovations were not matched by deep strategic thinking".⁴⁹ His tragic reversal of tactics and strategy proved fatal to the German war effort. His simultaneous reversal of the military and political goals of a sovereign nation completed his demise as a strategist.

For the last two years of the war Ludendorff was the military dictator of Germany. Although not officially bestowed this title, the functioning of the German government during this time clearly defines this term. The military hierarchy, specifically Ludendorff, cleared all political and diplomatic activity of any consequence prior to its implementation. This process evolved into one in which the political component of strategy, both foreign and domestic, reacted solely to the military component. The military had become the soul of the government as opposed to an arm of its policy implementation. Political and economic decisions were not rendered as a contributing factor to national strategy but "in the name of military necessity".⁵⁰ This rearrangement of the normal decision process of government existed due to Ludendorff's concept of total war. This concept reserved no place for strategic input by the civilian statesman in the government. The national military commander was supreme. He oversaw all elements of the nation's governmental operations as well as those of the military.

"The military staff must be composed of the right men, of the best and ablest men, efficient in the domain of war on land, on sea, and in the air, in propaganda, war techniques, economics and politics, and they must be intimately acquainted with national life... They have no right to give orders".⁵¹

Thus, Ludendorff's idea of the governmental process during war resulted in a single dimensional structure incapable by its design of true strategic thought. The conduct of the last phases of the war demonstrates this fact.

The logic of Germany's 1918 offensive loses its vitality when viewed beyond the military context. Ludendorff's assessment concerning Germany's inability to survive the status quo is faultless. The reasonableness of his search for a decisive victory in the Schlieffen mold can also be argued having discussed his Prussian background and its deep rooted heritage in these matters. What cannot be explained is the glaring absence of the available diplomatic and political initiatives which could have intensified the impact of his initial military success. Hans Delbrouk accurately noted that the relative strength of Germany to its enemies in 1918 made decisive military victory impossible. Hence, a strategy of a decisive victory brought about through the sole application of these means was incongruous to its capabilities. The aim, therefore, of the offensive should have been a negotiated peace achieved by tiring the nations of the Entente through a series of tactical defeats. This scenario becomes realistic only if Germany applies the diplomatic savvy of announcing its desire for a negotiated peace prior to its

military action. Hence the political component adds to the strategic equation by offering an alternative. This action sets in motion the rationale for the offensive and in turn creates the environment for peace. The military action is thus relegated to a component of the strategic plan.⁵²

Ludendorff was incapable of seeing the complex but necessary linkage of the components of strategy that this type of thought provided. His unwillingness to entertain the blending of political and military efforts into a strategy is demonstrated in his own words on the subject.

"The nature of war has changed, the character of politics has changed, and now the relations existing between politics and the conduct of war must also change. All the theories of Clausewitz should be thrown overboard. Both warfare and politics are meant to serve the preservation of the people, but warfare is the highest expression of the national will to live, and politics must, therefore, be subservient to the conduct of war".⁵³

This insistence on the dominance of the military solution irrespective of the potential of all the other elements of strategy led to the defeat of Germany and its subsequent internal turmoil. The reason is basic. Ludendorff the strategist "had disregarded the most important lesson of history, the interrelationship of politics and war".⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

At first glance, the lessons in strategic thought which Ludendorff provides the student seem elementary. Clearly, he

allowed the military component of national strategy to dominate all others. Again, this narrow view excluded the rational evaluation of the merits of each of the separate components. The contribution of these entities to the desired end became an afterthought as opposed to an essential participant. Liddell Hart captured the essence of this thought in stating, "Ludendorff is an outstanding lesson in the danger of the expert who has so concentrated on his own department that he is unable to see the part in relation to the whole".⁵⁵ His continued stubbornness in refusing to consider viable alternatives to military victory provides ample credence to this assertion. But perhaps Ludendorff provides us more than just an example of a singularly dimensional strategist. Perhaps his story demonstrates how the dynamics of a nation can evolve beyond the control of the leadership and thus force the mutation of previously successful strategic thought.

The biographical sketch sought to provide the reader with an appreciation of the strength of the Prussian influence and its heritage on Ludendorff. All of Germany had experienced similar pressures. We must assume that Ludendorff recognized that the war aims of his government continually appeared to be beyond the limits of its capabilities. The power structure created by Bismark, however, could not settle for less than its stated national goals. Weakened by what it viewed as an internal class struggle, this government became hostage to its own propaganda. Only a decisive victory would justify the sacrifices made by its

people. Hence, "the men in charge of Germany's destiny could not contemplate anything other than decisive victory".⁶ Perhaps these circumstances serve as an example of a strategist denied the logical path to his nation's goals by forces outside his control. Hence another dimension to the strategic solution is revealed. There are times that the strategist must cope with forces which seek to drive him to an irrational solution. His identification of these forces and his neutralization of their impact becomes essential to success.

The complexity of strategy and its players provides to the student a continuous field of data with limitless combinations. The most appealing path to learning the complexities of the strategic solution seems to be the study of success. Ludendorff, however, provides us an example worthy of study despite his failure. His story is tragic yet revealing. His struggle to play in the strategic arena provides new insights to the parameters of the game and its consequences. Roger Parkinson's labelling of Ludendorff as the "Tormented Warrior" perhaps captures the essence of the emotions involved when attempting to array the components of strategy. To not understand the correct relationship of these components, unfortunately, will be the start of the next strategic failure.

ENDNOTES

1. B.H. Liddell Hart, Reputations Ten Years Later, p. 181.
2. Hans Spier, Ludendorff: "The German Concept of Total War", Makers of Modern Strategy, ed., Peter Paret, p. 314.
3. Roger Parkinson, Tormented Warrior, p. 13.
4. Ibid., p. 14.
5. Trevor N. Dupuy, A Genius for War, p. 165.
6. Parkinson, p. 14.
7. Barbara W. Tuchmann, The Guns of August, p. 17.
8. D.J. Goodspeed, Ludendorff: Genius of World War I, p. 61.
9. Ibid., p. 14.
10. Erich Ludendorff, My War Memories, Vol I, p. 12.
11. Correlli Barnett, The Sword Bearers, p. 272.
12. Trevor N. Dupuy, The Military Lives of Hindenberg and Ludendorff of Imperial Germany, p. 45.
13. Ibid., p. 53.
14. Parkinson, p. 108.
15. Goodspeed, p. 189.
16. Barnett, p. 270.
17. Parkinson, p. 110.
18. Barnett, p. 270.
19. Goodspeed, p. 195.
20. Martin Kitchen, The Silent Dictator, p. 47.
21. Dupuy, Military Lives, p. 106.

22. Erich Ludendorff, My War Memories, Vol II, p. 543.
23. Dupuy, Military Lives, p. 122.
24. Barnett, p. 289.
25. Gerhard Ritter, The Sword and the Scepter, p. 234.
26. Barnett, p. 271.
27. Ibid.
28. Parkinson, p. 20.
29. Ibid., p. 56.
30. Liddell Hart, p. 188.
31. Dupuy, A Genius For War, p. 163.
32. Parkinson, p. 96.
33. Ibid., p. 117.
34. Goodspeed, p. 201.
35. Dupuy, A Genius For War, p. 163.
36. Spier, p. 314.
37. James L. Stokesbury, A Short History of World War I, p. 236,
see also, Ritter, p. 95.
38. Liddell Hart, p. 197.
39. Dupuy, Military Lives, p. 120.
40. Barnett, p. 278.
41. Ludendorff, p. 537.
42. Barnett, p. 278.
43. Michael Howard, Clausewitz, p. 35.
44. Norman Stone, General Erich Ludendorff, The War Lords,
ed., Michael Carver, p. 73.
45. Carl von Clausewitz, On War, p. 128.

46. Dennis Showalter, "Total War for Limited Objectives: An Interpretation of German Grand Strategy", Grand Strategy in War and Peace, ed. Paul Kennedy, p. 106.
47. Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1918", Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed. Paul Kennedy, p. 552.
48. Ludendorff, p. 596.
49. Stone, p. 82.
50. Dupuy, Military Lives, p. 112.
51. Erich Ludendorff, The Nation At War, p. 176.
52. Gordon A. Craig, "Delbrouk: The Military Historian", Makers of Modern Strategy Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler, ed. Edward Earle, p. 282.
53. Erich Ludendorff, The Nation at War, p. 24.
54. Craig, p. 282.
55. B.H. Liddell Hart, Through the Fog of War, p. 137.
56. Kitchen, p. 22.

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