

## Aufsatz

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# The Knives Are Out

The Reception of Erich Ludendorff's Memoirs in the Context of the Dolchstoß Myth, 1919–1925

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**Zusammenfassung:** Erich Ludendorff was the dominant figure of the German war effort in the second half of the Great War. After the military collapse he was one of the main proponents of the *Dolchstoßlegende*, the main liability of the Weimar Republic. This article investigates what role his 1919 memoirs *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* played in advancing this myth.



*Erich Ludendorff was one of the main advocates of the Dolchstoß myth.*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The narrative about the German defeat in the Great War proved to be the Weimar Republic's biggest burden. The nationalist right championed the version that while the army was undefeated in the field, it was 'stabbed in the back' by the revolutionary home

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a significantly shortened version of my MSt dissertation as submitted to Oxford University. The thesis was supervised by Myfanwy Lloyd whose feedback on a previous version of this article is also much appreciated.

front. This so-called *Dolchstoß* myth was promoted by the German supreme command when defeat was inevitable, and the myth – with slightly evolving meaning – endured throughout the Weimar Republic and beyond. The aim of this article is to understand the role that Erich Ludendorff's published memoirs *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* played in the origin and evolution of the stab-in-the-back myth until 1925, the year of the *Dolchstoßprozess*.

Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937) was First Quartermaster-General of the German General Staff from mid-1916 until November 1918. He was the dominant figure of the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL), a quasi-dictatorship that not only directed the military aspects of the war but also influenced the economy and significantly influenced politics. While most authors agree that in particular Ludendorff's memoirs were significant in anchoring the *Dolchstoß* myth in the public conscience, no evidence for this assertion is provided.<sup>2</sup> Also, Erich Ludendorff is a particularly relevant object of study, not only because he is both the object and source of historical writing, but one can also view him as a 'hinge' between Bismarck and Hitler.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Ludendorff's role in Weimar Germany has not been addressed comprehensively by historians.<sup>4</sup>

I will consider how Ludendorff's 1919 memoirs entered public discourse until 1925, which will be done along three events whose common theme is the *Dolchstoß*: The first event is the publication of *Meine Kriegserinnerungen*, the second event is the parliamentary inquiry into the reasons for the collapse of the German military effort, and the third event is the *Dolchstoßprozess*, a 1925 libel trial that was used by the opposing parties to discuss the *Dolchstoß* legend. The key result of my investigation is that while Ludendorff's memoirs directly reached only a small (yet influential) part of society, they were a major source for the parliamentary inquiry and libel trial, which indirectly reached the public. Based on textual analysis, I consider an important aspect of Weimar political culture by identifying how a single document impacted political discourse. Recognising that there is a diffusive effect (a drop of ink in a glass of water), there is, however, convincing evidence that allows to trace ideas expressed in *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* in publications by other authors.

What was the *Dolchstoß*? One of the characteristics of the *Dolchstoß* myth is that a precise definition is impossible as the term *Dolchstoß* (and likewise 'November

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<sup>2</sup> For the case of Hindenburg's and Ludendorff's memoirs alone it was claimed that 'even more effective than the files of the parliamentary enquiry were the memoirs that were written in short sequence,' Anja Lobenstein-Reichmann, *Die Dolchstoßlegende. Zur Konstruktion eines sprachlichen Mythos*. In: *Muttersprache* 112 (2002), pp. 25–41, p. 36. Another example is that the memoirs had 'an immediate high effect beyond the officer corps and the middle classes,' Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration. Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1933*. Düsseldorf 2003, p. 321. See also Gerd Krumeich, *Die Dolchstoß-Legende*. In: Etienne François/Hagen Schulze (ed.), *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte I*, Munich 2001, pp. 585–599, p. 594 and Joachim Petzold, *Die Dolchstoßlegende. Eine Geschichtsfälschung im Dienst des deutschen Imperialismus und Militarismus*, Berlin 1963, pp. 53–56 for similar statements. Ludendorff's most recent biographer wrote that Ludendorff 'opened a "war of memoirs" which should have an enduring effect on Weimar political culture,' Manfred Nebelin, *Ludendorff. Diktator im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Munich 2010, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 520.

<sup>4</sup> Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914–1956*, Paderborn 2002, p. 259.

criminals') had different meanings for different people at different times. The meanings of the *Dolchstoß* term range from specific allegations of treason to the less severe allegation that the home front did not sufficiently support the fighting front. More generally, any civilian action that obstructed the continuation of the military effort was considered to be of *Dolchstoß*-type.<sup>5</sup>

This short article does not allow for a detailed description of the historiography of the *Dolchstoßlegende*. The reader is well served by the comprehensive account by Barth.<sup>6</sup> Although Ludendorff lacks a biography spanning his entire life, the comprehensive work of Nebelin in the vein of 'new political history' covers Ludendorff's life up to 1919.<sup>7</sup> The article is organised as follows. Section 2 addresses the immediate impact of the publication of Ludendorff's memoirs. This is followed by a section on the impact the memoirs had on the parliamentary inquiry into the collapse of the German military effort, and Section 4 considers the role of the memoirs in the *Dolchstoßprozess* in 1925.

## The publication of Ludendorff's *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* in 1919 and the immediate reaction

In this section, I consider three questions related to the publication of Ludendorff's memoirs: First, is there evidence that the memoirs themselves reached a significant part of the population? Second, how did the memoirs present the *Dolchstoß* topic? Third, what was the immediate reaction to the presentation of that topic? The last question is split into two parts: one addressing newspaper and academic reviews, and the other considering Hans Delbrück's critique of the memoirs.

The memoirs were published on 20 August 1919 by E.S. Mittler & Sohn in Berlin, a publisher that had a longstanding relationship with the armed forces. Ludendorff's memoirs are factually problematic yet valuable as a historic source. Telling are the circumstances around their creation: after the armistice, Ludendorff fled to Sweden and when he returned to Germany by the end of February 1919, he had produced 270,000 words. Ludendorff wrote his memoirs with almost no access to official documents. Only the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin had read a draft and suggested changes to soften personal attacks on Hindenburg.<sup>8</sup> A major reason for writing the memoirs was to justify his actions since parts of the public had made him personally responsible for the death of an entire generation. The memoirs were published in a standard version (628 pages long) on 20 August 1919, and in a popular version (218 pages long) in 1921. The book ran into five editions in 1919 with further editions until 1926 when it went out of print.

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<sup>5</sup> See the various aspects of this *Dolchstoß* notion in Friedrich Hiller v. Gaertringen, 'Dolchstoß'-Diskussion und 'Dolchstoß'-Legende im Wandel von vier Jahrzehnten. In: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 13 (1963), pp. 25–48 and Petzold, *Dolchstoßlegende*.

<sup>6</sup> Barth, *Desintegration*.

<sup>7</sup> Nebelin, *Diktator*.

<sup>8</sup> James Cavallie, *Ludendorff und Kapp in Schweden. Aus dem Leben zweier Verlierer*, Frankfurt/Main 1995, pp. 67–79.

The shortened popular version was introduced in 1921, and five further editions appeared from 1936 onwards. Publicly available sources claim that overall 100,000 to 200,000 copies of Ludendorff's *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* had been printed until the late 1930s, however this number appears overstated as it would lead to implausibly high print runs. The size of the actual print runs of Ludendorff's *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* remains unknown as the archive of the publisher was destroyed in February 1945, and Ludendorff's personal papers have not been made available to historians by his descendants.<sup>9</sup>

The sales price of the memoirs was high compared to similar publications suggesting a powerful public appeal of Ludendorff. An advert by a mail order bookseller in Berlin in the Saturday supplement of the *Vossische Zeitung* of 16 August 1919 shows the following prices for Ludendorff's memoirs: half-cloth 30 Marks, half-leather 42.50 Marks and luxury edition 200 Marks. It is instructive to compare this to prices for other memoirs from the same advert: Hindenburg 20 Marks, Bethmann Hollweg 18 Marks for two volumes. To put this into context, a skilled railway worker earned 139 Marks per week in 1919, and a mason had an hourly wage of 3 Marks.<sup>10</sup> The pricing and marketing of the memoirs appears to be targeting the educated middle classes. This social group has a particular relevance for the *Dolchstoß* legend as they acted as a 'patriotic multiplier of opinion.'<sup>11</sup> Contemporaries associated the *Dolchstoß* myth closely with Ludendorff so that it is natural to ask what role his memoirs played in establishing the myth. It should be noted that the memoirs – while promoting the myth – do not claim that the 'stab-in-the-back' was the only or even the most significant reason for the military collapse. Indeed, the text offers a variety of causes also including the British blockade, allied propaganda and allied superiority in troops and materiel.<sup>12</sup> However, the *Dolchstoß* motif can be identified in many prominent places in Ludendorff's memoirs. Space does not permit to give an exhaustive list of these instances but this section summarises several key examples.

The theoretical foundation for the *Dolchstoßlegende* was laid on page one of the memoirs (first chapter entitled 'My thinking and acting'<sup>13</sup>) where Ludendorff defined the link between the fighting front and the home front: 'The armed forces and the people were one and the same.'<sup>14</sup> This implies that the army can win the war if, and only if, it receives sufficient support from the home front, and this is precisely the essence of the

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<sup>9</sup> A figure of 150,000 copies sold immediately after the memoirs' publication appeared in a 1938 hagiography of Ludendorff by his widow Mathilde, Mathilde Ludendorff (ed.), Erich Ludendorff. Sein Wesen und Schaffen, Munich 1938. The appendix of Mathilde Ludendorff's book contained two pages with bibliographical data of Ludendorff's main publications giving the 1938 print run as 171–180,000 for *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* in the standard version and 31–40,000 for the popular version.

<sup>10</sup> In: *Vossische Zeitung* of 16.08.1919. Saturday supplement, evening edition, p. 2. Gerhard Bry, *Wages in Germany, 1871-1945*, Princeton 1960, p. 364.

<sup>11</sup> Barth, *Desintegration*, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> Erich Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen*, Berlin 1919, pp. 284–291, 513f.

<sup>13</sup> All translations are mine in this text unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1: 'Wehrmacht und Volk waren eins.' See also Hans Delbrück, *Ludendorff, Tirpitz, Falkenhayn*, Berlin 1920, p. 15.

*Dolchstoß*-narrative. Moreover, in the chapter ‘The basis of warfare and the instrument of war,’ Ludendorff became more specific and blamed the left-wing faction of the social democrats, the USPD, for literally killing the German people: ‘The German people at home and in front of the enemy were dealt a mortal blow.’<sup>15</sup>

The memoirs were written before the image of the ‘stab-in-the-back’ was widely publicised in the statement Hindenburg made in November 1919 at the parliamentary inquiry (see Section 3). However, the above quote very clearly gives an extremely close approximation of this motif as the German original for ‘mortal blow’ is *Todesstoß* which of course is strikingly similar to *Dolchstoß* yet somewhat less memorable. Those parts of the memoirs covering events after the summer of 1917 contained further accusations around the *Dolchstoß*-topic. The range of these accusations is rather broad: examples include assertions that the government allowed USPD propaganda, that the subversive efforts of the USPD had weakened the home front, and that army administrators were sabotaging the fighting front in the preparation for the final push in 1918. Ludendorff also discussed at length the various allegedly subversive actions of the ministry of foreign affairs, the *Reichstag* and the government.<sup>16</sup> The afterword again stressed the role of the revolution, the USPD and the various governments in causing the collapse of the otherwise undefeated German forces, and it is remarkable that, in this section of the memoirs, Ludendorff gave no other reason for the defeat.

The Berlin newspaper coverage of Ludendorff’s publication (coverage by regional newspapers is beyond the scope of this article) showed a dichotomy along the political stance of the newspaper: while conservative and nationalist papers published extracts of the memoirs, the social democratic and socialist press commented ironically on these extracts. Several newspapers were granted the rights to print short excerpts of the memoirs on the eve of the official publication with the extracts covering a broad and for Ludendorff favourable range of topics. For example, the *Vossische Zeitung* printed two politically contentious excerpts on 19 and 20 August 1919. Subjects were the relationship between the government and the Supreme Army Command (19 August) and the military and economic advantages of the German war aims in 1917 (20 August). In a similar vein, the *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* printed excerpts on 19 August 1919 concerning Ludendorff’s relationship with politics, his decision to sue for peace and his dismissal by Kaiser Wilhelm II. A brief editorial comment preceding the article stated that the newspaper had always been outspoken about Ludendorff and therefore decided to print extracts of his memoirs without further comment. Less controversially, the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* printed an extract on 20 August covering Ludendorff’s appointment as Quartermaster General. These publications attracted coverage in left-wing newspapers, e.g. a *Vorwärts*-article from 19 August denouncing the decision of the right-wing press to publish such extracts. The newspaper coverage appears to have been

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<sup>15</sup> Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, p. 285.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419; ‘The home front was no longer able to steel the nerves of the army, it was already eating into [the army’s] bone marrow,’ *ibid.*, p. 471; Ludendorff claimed that units were deliberately given unsuitable replacements to weaken the front, *ibid.*, p. 493; also *ibid.*, pp. 518–520.

short lived and seems not to have gone beyond 21 August.<sup>17</sup> An interesting observation is that the newspapers did not address the reasons for the military collapse as suggested by Ludendorff, hence they did not promote his *Dolchstoß* version.

The publication of *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* immediately led to a strong reaction from the leading military historian of the time, Hans Delbrück. The public and progressively more polemical dispute between Ludendorff and Delbrück concerned the accuracy of Ludendorff's memoirs.<sup>18</sup> As an example I consider *Ludendorff, Tirpitz, Falkenhayn*, a collection of three reviews of memoirs. In the 'Ludendorff' chapter, Delbrück gave a 22-page review of *Meine Kriegserinnerungen*. The verdict was nuanced, also acknowledging Ludendorff's 'greatness,' yet also savage: 'Every sentence an absurdity, a historical falsity.' He conceded that Ludendorff had faced an unprecedented situation in the war in terms of complexity of the war machine and the decisions required. As a professional historian Delbrück mostly referred to the memoirs by giving page numbers and quoting verbatim.<sup>19</sup> Delbrück did address and attempt to debunk the *Dolchstoß* myth as illustrated in two instances. In the first example, Delbrück identified the basic idea of Ludendorff's text as claiming that Germany could have won the war if only the people had sustained the will until the very end, and that will was lacking from Ludendorff's perspective as the (political) leadership was missing. Delbrück questioned the underlying assumptions on the public consciousness and the effectiveness of the government's means to raise morale, e.g. through stricter control of the press as suggested by Ludendorff.<sup>20</sup>

Second, having pointed out contradictions in *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* concerning Ludendorff's assessment of the will to fight in 1918, Delbrück then approached the heart of the matter, namely the 'Spirit of 1914.' He quoted a line from the memoirs where Ludendorff had written that the German government had let the Spirit of 1914 perish mostly blaming the various chancellors and the *Auswärtiges Amt*. Again, by pointing out contradictions in Ludendorff's memoirs concerning the will to

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<sup>17</sup> Ludendorff über die Kriegspolitik im Osten. In: Vossische Zeitung of 19.08.1919, evening edition, p. 4. Die Kriegsziele der Heeresleitung von 1917. In: Vossische Zeitung of 20.08.1919, evening edition, p. 4. Ludendorffs Kriegserinnerungen. In: Berliner Börsen-Zeitung of 19.08.1919, evening edition, p. 2. Ludendorffs Berufung als Erster Generalquartiermeister am 29. August 2016. In: Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung of 20.08.1919, morning edition, p. 2. Ludendorffs Kriegserinnerungen. In: Vorwärts of 19.08.1919, evening edition, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> For completeness the main publications in this dispute were Hans Delbrück, Ludendorff. In: Preussische Jahrbücher 178 (1919), pp. 83–101, Erich Ludendorff and Hans Delbrück, General Ludendorffs Erwiderung auf Professor Delbrücks Kritik in den 'Preußischen Jahrbüchern' und Professor Delbrücks Replik, Berlin 1920, Hans Delbrück, Falkenhayn und Ludendorff. In: Preussische Jahrbücher 180 (1920), pp. 249–281, Delbrück, Ludendorff, Tirpitz, Falkenhayn, Hans Delbrück, Ludendorffs Selbstporträt, Berlin 1922 and Hermann v. Kuhl, Ludendorffs Selbstporträt. In: Preußische Jahrbücher 189 (1922), pp. 1–16.

<sup>19</sup> For the wider dispute see Roger Chickering, Sore Loser. Ludendorff's Total War. In: Roger Chickering/Stig Förster (ed.), The Shadows of Total War. Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919–1939, Cambridge 2003, pp. 151–178 and Christian Lüdtkke, Hans Delbrück und Weimar. Für eine konservative Republik – gegen Kriegsschuldflüge und Dolchstoßlegende, Göttingen 2018. The Delbrück quote is from Delbrück, Ludendorff, Tirpitz, Falkenhayn, pp. 3, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 15–17 with many direct references to Ludendorff, e.g. to Ludendorff, Kriegserinnerungen, p. 349.

fight, Delbrück revealed the hollowness of Ludendorff's *Augusterlebnis* argument.<sup>21</sup> The length of Ludendorff's memoirs, the selective level of detail and the need to justify the author's actions, exacerbated by the fact that Ludendorff had no access to official documents when writing the text, made *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* an easy target for identifying contradictions, and Delbrück rose to the challenge.

Concluding this section, the above evidence does not imply that at the time of publication of the memoirs, in particular the *Dolchstoß* as defined in Ludendorff's *Kriegserinnerungen* had a significant effect on other publications and – by extrapolation – on the wider public. The textual content of the memoirs is clearly relevant to the *Dolchstoß* myth as it contains the basic narrative and key examples. The prominence of Ludendorff as an author is also a factor that will have helped anchoring the narrative in the public mind. However, the high sales price makes it unlikely that *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* was a true bestseller with a copy found in every household. This view is reinforced by newspaper coverage that was short-lived and without extensive serialisation. However, the subsequent sections confirm the view that the memoirs did have a strong effect in an elite circle of senior officers, politicians and academics.

## The parliamentary inquiry into the reasons for the collapse of the German military effort

Turning to the role Ludendorff's memoirs played in the parliamentary inquiry investigating the reasons for the 1918 collapse of the German military effort, I concentrate on the oral statement by Hindenburg in November 1919 and two written depositions which specifically address the *Dolchstoß* topic.

The first major event of the inquiry took place on 18 November 1919, when Hindenburg and Ludendorff appeared before the inquiry. Hindenburg read out a statement prepared by Ludendorff to set out the former Supreme Army Command's position and both answered oral questions.<sup>22</sup> Hindenburg's statement established the link between the home front and the fighting front:

“We could have brought this struggle to a favourable end if the home front had pursued the united and unified combination of the home and fighting front. This was the means we had envisaged for the victory of the German cause, which to achieve we had the firm will.”

The connection between the fronts is of course the main premise of Ludendorff's memoirs and a key aspect of the *Dolchstoß* legend. This link is found on p. 2 of the memoirs in the first chapter 'My thinking and acting.' Note that again the destabilising

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<sup>21</sup> Delbrück, Ludendorff, Tirpitz, Falkenhayn, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> The source for the analysis is Herbert Michaelis/Ernst Schraepler (ed.), *Ursachen und Folgen. Vom deutschen Zusammenbruch 1918 und 1945 bis zur staatlichen Neuordnung Deutschlands in der Gegenwart*, vol. 4, Berlin 1960, pp. 6–7.

effect of the home front is not the only factor leading to the collapse, there is also allied superiority and a hint of leadership issues. Hindenburg continued:

“Yet what happened now? While in enemy countries, despite their superiority in men and materiel, all social classes united in their will to victory, and even more tightly in difficult situations, we, where such unity was even more necessary given our inferiority, saw the growth of party political interests, and these led to division and decline of the will to win. [...] At the time we were hoping that the will to win would dominate all else.”

The content of this paragraph closely mirrors the first paragraph on p. 4 of the first chapter of Ludendorff's memoirs, where Ludendorff addressed three key points: 1) the political masters in Berlin could not face the necessities of the war, 2) the allied democracies were united in their will to fight and 3) the German government was more interested in peace than in prosecuting the war. Interestingly, the inquiry statement claimed that history will judge this behaviour, whereas the memoirs said that the civilian leadership had not learned anything from history. A little later in the statement, Hindenburg addressed the discipline of the troops:

In this time the secret disintegration of the navy and army began as the continuation of similar phenomena in peacetime. [...] The good troops, that distanced themselves from the subversion, had to suffer gravely under the duty-breaching behaviour of their revolutionary comrades; they had to carry the whole burden of battle. The intentions of the leadership could no longer be implemented. Our repeated demands for stricter discipline and stricter laws were not met.

The subversion of the army and navy was a constant motif of Ludendorff's memoirs. Also the topic of declining discipline is recurrent and will appear again in inquiry depositions by senior commanders as shown in subsequent sections. The Hindenburg-Ludendorff appearance at the inquiry was widely covered by Berlin newspapers, several of them printing a partial transcript of the proceedings. On the day before the witness statement, the *Vossische Zeitung* printed an article explaining why Hindenburg would appear before the parliamentary inquiry, an article that also included quotations from Ludendorff's *Meine Kriegserinnerungen*.<sup>23</sup>

One of the experts the inquiry called upon was Hermann v. Kuhl (1856–1958) who belonged to the rare breed of educated commanders. Having studied classical philology, German and linguistics he obtained a doctorate in philosophy in 1878. He

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<sup>23</sup> Hindenburg vor dem Ausschuss. In: *Vossische Zeitung* of 17.11.1919, morning edition, p. 1. Hindenburg vor dem Ausschuss. In: *Vorwärts* of 18.11.1919, evening edition, pp. 1–2 with follow-up *Der Kopf Deutschlands*. In: *Vorwärts* of 19.11.1919, morning edition, p. 1. Die Aussagen der deutschen Heerführer. In: *Vossische Zeitung* of 18.11.1919, evening edition, pp. 1–3. Oberste Heeresleitung und U-Boot-Krieg. In: *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* of 18.11.1919, evening edition, pp. 1–2. Hindenburg und Ludendorff vor dem Ausschuss. In: *Berliner Tageblatt* of 18.11.1919, evening edition, pp. 1–2. Die O.H.L. vor dem Ausschuss. In: *Berliner Volks-Zeitung* of 18.11.1919, evening edition, pp. 1–2. Hindenburg und Ludendorff vor dem Untersuchungsausschuss. In: *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* of 18.11.1919, evening edition, pp. 1–2. Untersuchungsausschuss. In: *Freiheit* of 18.11.1919, evening edition, p. 1.

then entered the Prussian army rising to chief of staff of Army Group Rupprecht in 1916, where he was instrumental in planning all major offensive and defensive actions of the second half of the war. He retired in 1919 with the rank of general and turned to writing military history.<sup>24</sup> Kuhl's position as chief of staff and regular interaction with Ludendorff gave him a good overview of the military situation on the entire Western front. He was an intelligent observer who realised early on that Ludendorff had attempted to deflect the blame for a failed offensive in 1918. On the other hand, he had a long-standing relationship with Ludendorff that extended beyond the end of the war.<sup>25</sup>

Kuhl's written *Dolchstoß* deposition was intended to be the core account with other experts commenting on it. It ran at a little over 30 pages and was structured into six chapters. Kuhl's approach was to outline his main *Dolchstoß* thesis and add facts that he collected from various sources (mostly newspaper articles, pamphlets and memoirs). In a separate deposition on military reasons for the collapse, Kuhl stated explicitly that in the absence of an official history of the war, memoirs were the only available source, and Ludendorff's memoirs were the most significant source. To illustrate the link with Ludendorff's memoirs, three chapters of Kuhl's deposition are considered in more detail.<sup>26</sup>

1. In the introductory chapter 'The reasons for the collapse' Kuhl stated immediately that – in line with Ludendorff's approach – subversive activities were but one of many reasons for the collapse. Kuhl proceeded to name several further reasons, some of which he detailed in subsequent sections: the allied blockade, allied propaganda, lack of replacement troops, enemy superiority, collapse of allies, lack of a unified German supreme command.<sup>27</sup> Kuhl summarised the introductory chapter by aligning his narrative with Ludendorff's (Kuhl's italics):

"The claim that only the stab-in-the-back of the home front robbed us of our victory cannot be upheld under any circumstances. However, that the pacifist and internationalist efforts, the anti-militarism, the blurred ideas of international understanding and everlasting peace, especially the revolutionary subversion of

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<sup>24</sup> Hans Meier-Welcker, Kuhl, Hermann von. In: Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (ed.), *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 13. Berlin 1982, pp. 251f.

<sup>25</sup> See footnote 2 in Siegfried Kaehler, *Vier quellenkritische Untersuchungen zum Kriegsende 1918*. In: *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Philologisch-Historische Klasse* 1960 (1960), pp. 423–481, p. 428 and Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Hermann v. Kuhl, *Gutachten des Generals der Inf. a. D. von Kuhl. Entstehung, Durchführung und Zusammenbruch der Offensive von 1918*. In: Albrecht Philipp (ed.), *Ursachen des Zusammenbruchs. Entstehung, Durchführung und Zusammenbruch der Offensive von 1918*, vol. 3, *Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der deutschen Verfassunggebenden Nationalversammlung und des Deutschen Reichstages 1919–1928*, Berlin 1925, pp. 1–238, p. 5. According to the index of Kuhl's deposition, Ludendorff is mentioned on more than 150 pages in an account of 238 pages. On many if not most of the pages where Ludendorff is mentioned, Kuhl also referred to the memoirs quoting this source at various lengths.

<sup>27</sup> Hermann v. Kuhl, *Gutachten des Sachverständigen General der Inf. a. D. von Kuhl. Der Dolchstoß*. In: Albrecht Philipp (ed.), *Ursachen des Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918*, vol. 6, *Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der deutschen Verfassunggebenden Nationalversammlung und des Deutschen Reichstages 1919–1928*, Berlin 1928, pp. 1–39, pp. 3–4. For the corresponding Ludendorff view on the allied blockade see for example Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, p. 360.

the army, originating from the home front, contributed to our collapse can be proved.”<sup>28</sup>

While the above factors are largely military in nature and may appear in the account of any military commander, the basic premise of the axis fighting front–home front is clearly aligned with Ludendorff, and it must have been a conscious choice of Kuhl’s to foreground the *Dolchstoß* motif.

2. In the subsequent chapter ‘The home front’ Kuhl provided evidence that was supposed to show how the home front was subverted by revolutionary activities. Again, the basic narrative reads somewhat like filling gaps in Ludendorff’s memoirs by adding concrete examples. Citing an account of revolutionary activities by another retired general, Ernst v. Wrisberg, Kuhl repeated a quote attributed to a SPD politician that a German victory was not in the interests of Social Democracy, a quote that was also included in *Meine Kriegserinnerungen*.<sup>29</sup> Kuhl moreover claimed that the party had been subverting the war effort ever since the war began. While members of the general staff had been convinced of subversive socialist activities from an early stage of the war so that blaming the USPD for the collapse was no novel idea, this concept had been heavily reinforced by statements in Ludendorff’s memoirs.<sup>30</sup>

3. The chapter ‘The army’ is the longest chapter running at slightly over 14 pages. It is essentially a long string of examples that supposedly illustrate subversive activities and their effect on the army. Much of the evidence was based on book or newspaper publications and speeches that took place after the publication of Ludendorff’s memoirs so that the chapter has the air of providing additional detail to an existing narrative. However, in an overlap with Ludendorff’s memoirs Kuhl claimed that the young replacement troops arriving from home were ‘contaminated and rotten,’ spoiled by a lack of discipline and high wages. Kuhl proceeded to say that particularly German soldiers that had been released from Russian captivity were infected with Bolshevism, an issue that Ludendorff had often addressed.<sup>31</sup> Kuhl closed the chapter with his version of the *Dolchstoßlegende*, a sentence he deemed so important that he repeated it at the end of the penultimate chapter: ‘In the final moment, the revolution thrust the dagger into the heart of the army, after subversive activities had long been trying to undermine it.’<sup>32</sup>

In summary, Kuhl did not quote any original text from *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* directly in his own *Dolchstoß* deposition. It is, however, certain that he used Ludendorff’s memoirs as a source so that overlaps will have been prompted by Ludendorff’s account. Moreover, the narratives were broadly aligned and Kuhl’s text appears to be an attempt to both make the narrative more precise and substantiate it.

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<sup>28</sup> v. Kuhl, *Dolchstoß*, pp. 5f.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6 and Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, p. 291.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 365f.

<sup>31</sup> v. Kuhl, *Dolchstoß*, p. 14 and Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, p. 260. See for example *ibid.*, p. 517 for a whole paragraph (60 words) on soldiers returning from leave. Similar statements in *ibid.*, pp. 564, 605.

<sup>32</sup> v. Kuhl, *Dolchstoß*, pp. 26f., 36.

In particular the basic premise of the key importance of the bond between army and home front underpins Kuhl's text as much as Ludendorff's memoir.

Another expert, Ludwig Herz (1863–1942), was a judge on a lower Berlin court who was briefly executive secretary of the parliamentary inquiry. Hailing from a wealthy and well-connected Jewish background, he also published political texts and did not shy away from conflicts with superiors. After retiring in 1924 he was called upon as an expert in the *Dolchstoßprozess* where he attempted to expose the *Dolchstoß* as a myth. He escaped the mass deportations of German Jews by committing suicide on 4 September 1942.<sup>33</sup> Herz submitted a deposition in the fourth subcommittee of the inquiry. Aiming to destroy the *Dolchstoßlegende*, his written opinion was the longest contribution to volume 6 of the inquiry documentation: the main deposition ran at ca. 100 pages, plus two appendices of ca. 20 pages and twelve exhibits totalling ca. 30 pages. The account was based on sources including memoirs, witness statements from the *Dolchstoß*-trial and official documents such as government memoranda and letters. The deposition was structured into fourteen chapters offering a broad range of *Dolchstoß*-related topics including the origin of the term *Dolchstoß*, the allied point of view on Germany's collapse and military aspects of the breakdown. In each chapter the approach was often forensic with concise arguments and exact citations.

The most explicit and significant use by Herz of Ludendorff's memoirs was in the chapter 'The collapse of the great offensive' where Herz summarised Ludendorff's *Dolchstoß*-narrative, expressly naming Ludendorff the 'main representative' of the myth.<sup>34</sup> Given that Herz used the Ludendorff memoirs to give a definition of the *Dolchstoßlegende*, it is likely that they served as a key source throughout the rest of the text even if this source remains unacknowledged. Indeed, there are several instances where Herz clearly weaved Ludendorff's memoirs into his own account, and two examples are as follows.

First, in the chapter 'A parallel,' Herz referred to Ludendorff's memoirs by repeating an account of a meeting of the war cabinet in Berlin.<sup>35</sup> Herz also contrasted Ludendorff's opinion on the relationship between officers and men with Petain's behaviour, and he commented – without giving a precise location in the memoirs – on Ludendorff's criticism of a particular type of punishment ('Anbinden') being banned.<sup>36</sup> This example of close attention to the minor detail of a particular punishment suggests the impact Ludendorff's memoirs had on Herz and hence the parliamentary inquiry. And

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<sup>33</sup> Reinhard Hillebrand, Jurist im Porträt. Dr. Ludwig Herz (1863–1942) – Demokrat, Jude und Richter im Kampf gegen die Dolchstoßlegende. In: *Recht und Politik* 52 (2016), pp. 104–108.

<sup>34</sup> Ludwig Herz, Gutachten des Sachverständigen Dr. Herz. *Geschichte, Sinn und Kritik des Schlagwortes vom 'Dolchstoß.'* In: Albrecht Philipp (ed.), *Ursachen des Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918*, vol. 6, *Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der deutschen Verfassungsgebenden Nationalversammlung und des Deutschen Reichstages 1919–1928*, Berlin 1928, pp. 99–202, p. 112.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115 corresponding to Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, pp. 604–610.

<sup>36</sup> Herz, Gutachten, p. 117 corresponding to Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, pp. 520–523, yet Herz did not give page numbers for the latter. Ludendorff regrets that this 'most effective' punishment was banned, see *ibid.*, p. 492. Another discussion of the treatment of officers is Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, pp. 309–313 in the context of officer training.

second, the chapter 'The history of the prosecution' traced the origins of the *Dolchstoß* term. In the most extensive reference to Ludendorff, Herz quoted ca. 90 words verbatim from Ludendorff's memoirs concerning morale of Bavarian troops. The chapter also contains two minor yet explicit references to Ludendorff's *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* where Herz addressed the issue of soldiers returning from home leave bringing revolutionary ideas to the front.<sup>37</sup> As demonstrated, Herz repeatedly referred to *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* and critically engaged with Ludendorff's memoirs in large parts of his deposition. The fact that Ludendorff is named the main proponent of the *Dolchstoßlegende* further substantiates the use of the memoirs as this was a natural and key primary source to use.

In summary, based on the selected three texts, it is very likely that Ludendorff's memoirs had a substantial effect on the parliamentary inquiry. First, the widely reported public statement prepared for Hindenburg fully reflected his thinking as expressed in the most prominent sections of his memoirs, i.e. the introduction and the epilogue. Second, the key depositions by Kuhl and Herz used *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* as a primary source for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the absence of other and more 'official' sources at least in the early 1920s. In addition, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* was written by an authoritative yet divisive author and provided a conveniently rich narrative which could be used according to personal political needs: it could either be remodelled and amended by new details to substantiate the key assertions (Kuhl), or it could be used as the 'authentic' *Dolchstoß*-document that was critically dissected to debunk the myth (Herz). However, since the transactions of the inquiry were published slowly and piecemeal, these depositions did not reach the public. This was achieved in 1925 in the Munich *Dolchstoßprozess* when the same experts were called upon and were able to use oral statements in the court room, a much bigger public stage than the parliamentary inquiry, to discuss the *Dolchstoß*.

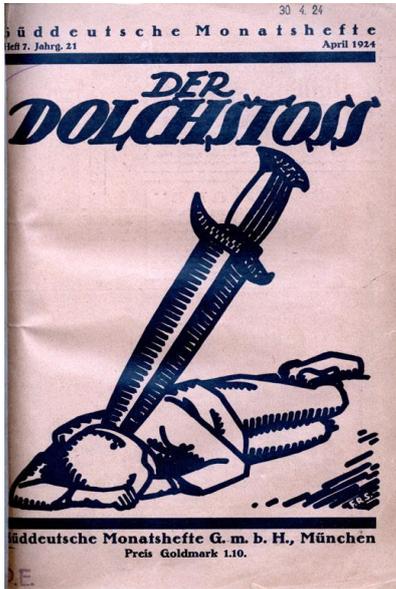
## The *Dolchstoßprozess* in 1925

The most significant event in the history of the *Dolchstoßlegende* was the *Dolchstoßprozess*, a libel trial held 1925 in Munich. It was based on *Dolchstoß*-themed accusations made in the April and May 1924 issues of the monthly *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*. Despite six years having been elapsed since their publication, Ludendorff's memoirs still had a significant impact on the magazine issues and the trial.

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<sup>37</sup> Regarding the Bavarian troops see Herz, Gutachten, p. 141 and Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, p. 518. Herz, Gutachten, p. 143 referred to Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, pp. 535, 540 in the context of defections of German soldiers to enemy lines purportedly giving away battle plans.

The monthly *Süddeutsche Monatshefte* was founded in 1903 as a conservative outlet and became increasingly nationalist with the outbreak of the Great War. One of the founders and the main editor was Nikolaus Cossmann, a highly educated member of the upper classes with Jewish ancestry.<sup>38</sup> The magazine was characterised by being a cultural and political publication that was, however, rooted in a specifically southern German identity.



Titelblatt der *Süddeutschen Monatshefte*, April 1924.

The year 1924 was a phase transition where the Weimar Republic moved from a period of revolutionary activity to a period of relative stability. By November 1923 the republic had survived several life-threatening experiences, and by the end of 1924 it had a fairly stable coalition government of political parties supporting the republic. It is clear that Cossmann intended to influence the May 1924 general elections: he had been collecting the material for the *Dolchstoßhefte* since 1921 and simply waited for a suitable moment to publish.

Attacking the left-wing political parties, the general theme of the *Dolchstoßhefte* was not *if* but rather *when* and *how* the *Dolchstoß* happened.<sup>39</sup> The Social Democrats viewed the *Dolchstoß* publication as a provocation and retaliated through seven articles published in the *Münchener Post*, a left-wing Munich newspaper accusing Cossmann of ‘historical fabrication.’<sup>40</sup> These articles were written at the behest of the editor, Martin Gruber, who now feared for his life as the controversy happened immediately after verdict in the Hitler-Ludendorff-trial.<sup>41</sup> Cossmann sued Gruber for slander and libel, and the trial took place in Munich in late 1925 with high-profile witnesses and experts. The trial received significant nationwide public attention as both Cossmann and Gruber were in charge of newspapers, and there were 40 journalists in the courtroom representing national and international titles.<sup>42</sup>

To consider the impact of Ludendorff’s memoirs on the *Dolchstoßhefte*, I concentrate on the April issue, entitled ‘The *Dolchstoß*,’ which was 72 pages long and

<sup>38</sup> Paul Nikolaus Cossmann (1869–1942). For a brief biography see Karl Alexander v. Müller, Cossmann, Paul Nikolaus. In: Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (ed.), *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 3. Berlin 1957, pp. 374f.

<sup>39</sup> See the note on p. 91 of the May issue. The link with the election was also pointed out by the defendant in his opening statement, see *Der Dolchstoß-Prozess in München, Oktober–November 1925. Eine Ehrenrettung des deutschen Volkes*, Munich 1925, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Geschichtsfälschung’ in the original. The articles also described Cossmann as a ‘Jewish boy from Frankfurt,’ ‘political poisoner with Jewish blood mix’ and ‘fat cat patriot,’ see Irmtraud Permooser, *Der Dolchstoßprozess in München 1925*. In: *Zeitschrift für Bayerische Landesgeschichte* 59 (1996), pp. 903–926, p. 911.

<sup>41</sup> *Ehrenrettung*, p. 512.

<sup>42</sup> Max Hirschberg, *Jude und Demokrat. Erinnerungen eines Münchener Rechtsanwalts 1883 bis 1939*, Munich 1998, pp. 251, 254.

divided into three chapters: the first chapter 'The Organisation' contains seven articles covering allied propaganda organisations and munition workers strikes in 1917/18. The second chapter addressed the topic of 'Military Reports' with nine contributions from former senior officers (including Kuhl). The third chapter, 'The Final Act', covered events between August 1918 and the military collapse in a single article, again written by a senior officer. The most relevant article in this issue is 'The Overall Situation' by Colonel Walter Nicolai, Ludendorff's former head of intelligence and propaganda.<sup>43</sup> Nicolai gave a hardline version of the *Dolchstoß* by claiming that Germany only sued for peace because of domestic politics and not due to allied superiority.<sup>44</sup> He then proceeded to list the usual reasons such as deserters, revolutionary pamphlets, soldiers returning from leave and replacement troops, see Kuhl's deposition for the parliamentary inquiry. A novel feature of Nicolai's account was the reference to subversive activities being orchestrated from the Soviet embassy in Berlin, a line of argument exactly corresponding to Ludendorff's memoirs.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Nicolai claimed that it was mainly the threat of the revolution that made Hindenburg and Ludendorff decide on 28 September 1918 to cease hostilities.<sup>46</sup> This appears to be a sharpening of the arguments given in *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* where Ludendorff pointed out that there were absolutely no reasons for a capitulation yet there was also no justification for carrying on the fight given the low morale.<sup>47</sup>

Turning to the impact of Ludendorff's memoirs on the *Dolchstoßprozess*, his ideas permeated the entire trial. While the retired general was not invited to give evidence, most witnesses referred to Ludendorff in some way or other and his name was always in the background. In the opening statement, Cossmann for example felt the need to explain that his editorial staff had been in touch with Ludendorff yet he himself had 'recently not had any contact with [Ludendorff].' The fact that there was prior contact with Ludendorff is evidenced by a footnote in the April *Dolchstoßheft* issue where the magazine acknowledges a personal communication from the General.<sup>48</sup> The most obvious immediate use of Ludendorff's memoirs in the trial was by the two legal counsels, Max Hirschberg for Gruber and Anton Count Pestalozza for Cossmann. Hirschberg repeatedly confronted witnesses with assertions he claimed were taken from *Meine Kriegserinnerungen*.<sup>49</sup> Besides the legal counsels, Hans Delbrück in his capacity as an expert also referred to Ludendorff's memoirs as shown in two examples. The main

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<sup>43</sup> Walter Nicolai, Die Gesamtlage. In: Süddeutsche Monatshefte 21:7 (1924), pp. 32–36. Walter Nicolai (1873–1947) was head of Section IIIb of the OHL.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 34f. and Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, p. 519.

<sup>46</sup> Nicolai, Die Gesamtlage, pp. 34f.

<sup>47</sup> Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, p. 582.

<sup>48</sup> Ewald Beckmann. Der Dolchstoßprozess in München vom 19. Oktober bis 20. November 1925, Munich 1925, p. 16 and Magnus v. Levetzow, Der letzte Akt. In: Süddeutsche Monatshefte 21:7 (1924), pp. 55–71, p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> Hirschberg credibly wrote in his memoirs that he had studied 'numerous memoirs' as preparation for the trial and gave several examples of authors, however, not mentioning Ludendorff. See Hirschberg, *Jude und Demokrat*, pp. 251f.

example is taken from Delbrück's expert statement where he claimed that Ludendorff had explicitly said in his memoirs that he relied on Wilson being able to implement the peace offer in autumn 1918. He continued 'Well, that a man like Ludendorff believes that we could have had the Wilson-peace in autumn 1918, this proves that we could have had peace in spring 1918 with even more certainty.'<sup>50</sup> There is indeed a corresponding passage in *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* to which Delbrück probably referred and that relates to 29 September 1918.<sup>51</sup> This assumption is corroborated by Delbrück discussing the same topic in a review of Ludendorff's memoirs and referring to the same page.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the Delbrück quote may be a sharpening of the Ludendorff assertion, or the rhetorical question in the memoirs may be a softening of an originally stronger remark.

In summary, the *Dolchstoßhefte* followed the narrative presented in Ludendorff's memoirs. Authors that had direct contact with Ludendorff were clearly influenced by the memoirs. Especially in the April issue, in accounts of events also covered in *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* authors supplied additional detail and accentuated different aspects. In the widely reported *Dolchstoßprozess*, dominated by Ludendorff despite his physical absence, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* were used tactically by legal counsels and experts alike. All sides had studied the memoirs closely, were aware of their deficiencies and employed them in the interests of clients or for political objectives. The outcome of the trial was of course significant for the further evolution of the *Dolchstoßlegende*: The myth was still alive and no subsequent public discussion about it took place for the remaining lifetime of the Weimar Republic, indeed it was given a new lease of life after Hitler came to power.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The opening shot in Ludendorff's war of publications, his memoirs *Meine Kriegserinnerungen*, was seminal for the *Dolchstoßlegende*. The expensive book was published in August 1919 and reached the educated middle classes, a key multiplier of Weimar opinion. Hence the account (written in a hurry without access to official documents) nevertheless embedded the idea in the wider public consciousness that the collapse of war effort was at least partly due to the home front.

In the second major event for the *Dolchstoßlegende*, the corresponding subcommittee of the parliamentary inquiry into the reasons for the collapse of the German war effort, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen* was referred to extensively and it was taken as a historical source. While the inquiry informed the discussion of the political elite, these discussions did not reach the wider public. This was achieved through the

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<sup>50</sup> Ehrenrettung, pp. 277f.

<sup>51</sup> Ludendorff, *Kriegserinnerungen*, p. 581.

<sup>52</sup> Delbrück, Ludendorff, Tirpitz, Falkenhayn, p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Barth, *Desintegration*, p. 516 who described the judgement in the *Dolchstoßprozess* and the ensuing breakdown of communication between the political left and right as the 'worst case.'

national media coverage of the *Dolchstoßprozess*, the libel trial that can be seen as the public version of the parliamentary inquiry with a significant overlap of participants. The expert depositions used Ludendorff's memoirs as an authentic historical document and the legal counsels used the text in their cross-examination. The Ludendorff narrative was repeated by authors in the *Dolchstoßhefte* and refuted by experts in the trial.

The article shows that the impact of topics presented in Ludendorff's memoirs was significant and achieved through various channels. However, the evidence discussed suggests that if the memoirs influenced the thinking of the broader population, this was accomplished rather indirectly with the direct impact of the memoirs having been confined to the usual suspects of the senior military, civil servants and politicians.

### Zitierempfehlung

Matthias A. Fahrenwaldt, The Knives Are Out. The Reception of Erich Ludendorff's Memoirs in the Context of the Dolchstoß Myth, 1919–1925, in: Portal Militärgeschichte, 18. Januar 2021, URL: [http://portal-militaergeschichte.de/fahrenwaldt\\_ludendorff](http://portal-militaergeschichte.de/fahrenwaldt_ludendorff), DOI: 10.15500/akm.18.01.2021 (Bitte fügen Sie in Klammern das Datum des letzten Aufrufs dieser Seite hinzu).