

Hindenburg

by Theodor Lessing¹

Originally published April 25, 1925

Prager Tagblatt

When you look into the good, fatherly face of old Hindenburg, the first thing you notice is the almost terrible gravity. Henrik Ibsen says of such people who cannot escape the limitations of the self, “*they are trapped in the barrel of ego.*” Such a trapped man, carrying the weight of the world, removed from all playfulness and dance, just such a serious and dignified man is old Hindenburg.



Paul Ludwig Hans Anton von Beneckendorff und von Hindenburg
(1847–1934)

I know this face and have known his life from my early youth. I have often viewed it with a smile, often in reverence, always with emotion. Bismark beautifully said of himself, “*I have very consciously remained standing at a certain stage of development.*” This was not necessary for Hindenburg. Nature intended him to be so simple, so straightforward and self-evident, that there was nothing to develop except the unobjectionable blossoming of native prejudices. German, Prussian, Christian, Monarchist, Soldier, Comrade, a member in lifestyle and outlook of that clean, well-mannered class who take their norms from “Little Gotha” and the social register.² All these norms are so unquestionable and obvious that anyone who thinks otherwise might as well be Chinese or Buddhist. Such outliers may exist, but they don’t belong. And when he refers to “We” and “We Germans,” he truly and good-naturedly assumes that in all normal cases, right-thinking people must be like those in the Gotha and the social register.

If one gets used to mastering the immense diversity and color of life with an open mind, then one can look, with the same grace and smile that one might bestow on a flower or bird, at the figure of man who effortlessly strode, blissfully ignorant, through seas of blood, through rivers of bile, over mountainous obstacles, burdened by immense responsibilities yet irresponsible at heart, for is he singularly incapable of seeing merit in the opposition’s cause or the dual nature of all living things. What better person is suited to be an idol, a statue, a symbol? When Hanover was still a kingdom, and the king was always away in England, an empty throne was set up at the royal court, and the Welfish (Hanoverian) nobility would pay their respects in parade before the empty throne. And at that time, they didn’t even have a symbolic puppet [seated in the throne] . . .

¹ Translation by George Phocas [2024]

² Little Gotha likely refers to a derivative (*Le Petit Gotha*) of the *Almanac of Gotha* (German: *Gothaischer Hofkalender*), a directory of Europe’s royalty and higher nobility, also including the major governmental, military and diplomatic corps. Germany’s social register was called the Rangliste.

Though I've known the shape of the hero who could send more people to their deaths in the name of 'Ideals' than Alexander, Caesar, and Attila, though I've known the good, serious, humbly-loyal face from close-up since my early youth due to many coincidental connections, I only later grasped the full simplicity and saintliness of this historic personage. It was during an anniversary of the Battle of Tannenberg. I was working temporarily as a teacher at the local high school, and the students were supposed to march by Hindenburg's city-gifted mansion singing *Deutschland über Alles*. Hundreds of enthusiastic children, cheering happily, led by us teachers, paraded past the old man who stood stolid and grave on the front steps of his house. We had the luck to be standing right in front of him as he raised his hand and began his heartfelt speech to the children. I would like to relive this moment, this contrast of sensations: of comedy and emotion; of complete isolation and oneness with the children; of heartfelt, high-spirited laughter and spiritual humility; but above all, my complete astonishment that this level of childishness was even possible. Hindenburg (we stood eye-to-eye) said in deep earnestness, "*Germany is in deep decline, the glorious times of the Kaiser and his heroes are past. But these children that here sing Deutschland über Alles, these are the children that will renew the old Reich. They will overcome that terrible event, the revolution. They will witness, once again, the glorious times of great, victorious wars. And you, my gentlemen teachers, you have the wonderful task of educating the youth in this spirit.*" The boys nudged me and grinned. "*And you, my dear freshmen, will enter Paris victorious, as your fathers did. I won't live to see it. I'll be with God. But I will look down from heaven and rejoice in your deeds and bless you.*"

All of this in deepest solemnity. We felt that this old man believed everything he said, word-for-word. He believed in all seriousness that after death he would go to God, sit on a cloud, view Germany below from this privileged station and bless my victorious students. Following this 'historic experience,' the cheekiest of these students drew a picture: Hindenburg as an angel, floating on a cloud, and blessing our freshmen class. It would have been easy to further encourage such mockery, but – and this is the weird part – there was none among us who weren't offended by this [the picture]. We felt that it was unchivalrous, that it was mean to fight with weapons of the mind when there was no power or possibility to parry back with similar weapons. For even in the old Prussian aristocracy and among the Junkers, whose intellectual needs are fully met by the crossword on weekdays and a good sermon from the Pastor on Sundays, even among that class of traditional and polished officialdom who recruit from the fraternal corps of the universities or from the appropriate ranks of the privileged regiments, that same lack of intellect and awareness is likely uncommon.

While Hindenburg was serving as 'Commander' in Oldenburg, a childhood friend of mine, Wilhelm Jordan—one of the best and greatest men in Germany—staged a Rhapsody from the Nibelungen at the local literary society. Hindenburg was asked to sponsor the evening. He answered with a letter in which he said that as a military man, he had unfortunately not found the time to occupy himself with literature and could therefore not assess the use or value of the evening. It does take a fair bit of barbarism for a German not to know the meaning of the Nibelungenlied, but it also takes a rare clarity and honesty for a brave soldier to admit it.

Even if you can likely count the number of books he has read in his lifetime, he does have an affinity for the visual arts that is somewhat strange: he collects pictures of the Madonna. It doesn't matter who they're by, or where they are from. He collects them the way other people collect stamps, and not from any religious impulse. An entire room in his villa is dedicated to just housing images of the Madonna. This illustrates to an observer of the human condition all the joy that can be had in a life that confines itself, and naively and unabashedly satisfies itself, within its limits. A transparent, true, honest, and reliable nature, free from problematics and falsehoods. And so too he appears in the mirror of his memoirs.

But one should still be careful in passing judgment; this is a whole and complete person. I don't want to speak to the inhumanity and heartfelt egotism of his naïve self-righteousness. The moment this most apolitical of people is misplaced in a political role will be a turning point. This man is, through-and-through, a man of service, without even the rudiments of brooding, self-reflective, self-determining personality. Herein the only essentials are orders, tradition, consensus, the 'one must,' the 'one isn't permitted.' A good, loyal St. Bernard, a 'Faithful Eckart,'³ a steadfast shelter and shield, but only so long as some clever fellow takes him in and teaches him to fetch, for in the wild he would be a directionless wolf. A nature like Hindenburg's will ask until death, "Where can I serve?"

It is certainly touching and moving that during the World War, one of the most evil and wicked natures in world history⁴ made Hindenburg's simple-mindedness and faithfulness subservient to his own ambition and will-to-power, draped in the flag of nationalist ideals. And therein lies the danger. According to Plato, the philosophers should be the leaders of the people. But a philosopher would never take the throne with a Hindenburg, a representative symbol, a question mark, a zero. One could say, "better a zero than Nero." But, unfortunately, history shows that behind every zero always lurks a future Nero.

³ A poem by J.W. Goethe

⁴ Likely a reference to General Erich Ludendorff, Chief of General Staff and later Head of German Warfare (from 1916). During the Weimar Republic, he took part in the failed 1920 Kapp Putsch and Hitler's 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. Ludendorff contributed significantly to the Nazis' rise to power.