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WOLFRAM PYTA, *Hindenburg: Herrschaft zwischen Hohenzollern und Hitler* (Munich: Siedler, 2007), 1,117 pp. ISBN 978 3 88680 865 6. €49.95

JESKO VON HOEGEN, *Der Held von Tannenberg: Genese und Funktion des Hindenburg-Mythos*, *Stuttgarter Historische Forschungen*, 4 (Cologne: Böhlau, 2007), xii + 475 pp. ISBN 978 3 412 17006 6. €54.90

Biography, particularly that of great historical figures, imposes a particular structure on the past both in terms of events and understanding, and so it is with Wolfram Pyta's exhaustive and engaging study of President and Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg. A serving lieutenant at the battles of Königgrätz/Sadowa (1866) and Sedan (1870), and regimental representative at the proclamation of the German Empire at Versailles, Hindenburg thereafter enjoyed a successful and varied military career which included service in the Great General Staff, at the Prussian War Ministry, as an army corps commander, and as a lecturer in tactics at the Military Academy in Berlin. Here he brought his appreciation of the relationship between technological progress and modern warfare to bear as well as his admiration for the American Confederate general, Robert E. Lee. While commander of the IV Army Corps in Magdeburg he had also engaged with the city's bourgeois civilian establishment, so developing an appreciation of the wider political sensitivities of the city's population. However, Social Democracy and its aspirations were not acceptable to Hindenburg and nor would they ever be. The organic political and moral national community rather than the measured pursuit of sectional interests defined his vision of politics from an early stage.

He was considered as Schlieffen's successor in 1906, but passed over and thereafter retired early with the rank of general in March 1911. He chose to settle with his wife in Hanover, where he had been stationed following its annexation by Prussia in 1867 and developed a deep affection for its people and cultural life. All of this belied his East Elbian, Junker roots and confirmed that he was considerably more than a soldier pure and simple.

Even this 'more than respectable career', as Pyta dubs it, had almost been cut short at Königgrätz when a bullet struck his helmet, but spared him any further damage. And the outbreak of war in August 1914 did not immediately promise him further advancement, for he was unable to persuade Moltke to use him in any capacity. It

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was pure happenstance that changed all this and transformed the story, as Pyta tells it, of a successful military officer, devoted husband, and much-loved father into that of a definitive actor on the historical stage. Contrary to German expectations, the Russian armies mobilized swiftly and invaded a thinly-defended East Prussia while the main German forces were fully engaged in France. Hindenburg's intervention and role at this point is the stuff of historical legend, but as Pyta and Jesko von Hoegen demonstrate, the legend rested on a carefully and deliberately crafted myth, rather than on Hindenburg's substantive contribution to the series of stunning German military victories on the Eastern Front.

Hindenburg's concrete military achievements were certainly thin. The destruction of an entire Russian army at the Battle of the Masurian Lakes in late August 1914 occurred thanks to the strategic aplomb of Max Hoffmann and the operational brilliance of Erich Ludendorff, who had already distinguished himself during the seizure of Liège. The two were the architects first of the victories in East Prussia and thereafter, alongside August von Mackensen, of the campaigns that eventually destroyed the Russian army and delivered Germany final victory in eastern Europe. But Hoffmann later fumed and Ludendorff lashed out in impotent rage against the towering reputation their work had somehow lent Hindenburg. This Hindenburg myth rapidly transcended the military and transformed the Field Marshal from a latter-day Blücher into a man of Bismarckian stature, who encapsulated the essence of German nationhood and came even to overshadow the reigning head of state, Kaiser Wilhelm II. Hoffmann's memoirs were far from complimentary towards Hindenburg and, when taking junior officers on tours of the East Prussian battlefields after the war, he was wont to point theatrically at a small cottage and declare that Hindenburg had slept there before the battle, during the battle, and after the battle. In fairness to Hindenburg he had also found time to organize the evacuation of his ancestors' mortal remains from the family vault at Neudeck, which lay in the path of the advancing Russians. Later, during the winter of 1915-16, Hindenburg had pursued his great love of hunting to the exclusion of matters military while Ludendorff busied himself organizing the defence and administration of the conquered territories of Lithuania, Belarus, and north-eastern Poland. This was pretty much in accordance with the High Command's

expectations. Hindenburg had been given command of the Eighth Army in August 1914 precisely because his notorious lack of dynamism would lend the more junior Ludendorff a free hand in operational matters.

The construction of the myth that paved the way for Hindenburg's career as a Weimar politician and thereafter, as Pyta argues, as its deliberate and determined gravedigger, therefore lies at the core of both authors' works and, given the military realities, is demanding of an explanation. Von Hoegen's study is based on his doctoral dissertation, which he completed under Pyta's supervision, so it is unsurprising that the two authors agree on the big issues and that much of their narrative overlaps significantly. That said, Pyta structures his exhaustive account more directly around the life and times of Hindenburg himself, whilst the ultimate focus of von Hoegen's study rests on the reception of the Hindenburg myth in the public domain, particularly in the press. To this extent the works are complimentary. If von Hoegen's bears the tell-tale hallmarks of a reworked doctoral study and Pyta's the assurance and urbanity of a master historian, both are engaging and valuable contributions to our understanding of earlier twentieth-century Germany.

For all his indifference to operational matters, Hindenburg proved focused and energetic when it came to securing his public reputation and endowing it with Herculean qualities. Whilst the High Command controlled and rationed news to excess, journalists found that the titular commander first of the Eighth Army and then of the Eastern High Command (OberOst) was always willing to make time for extensive interviews during which he stressed the scale and quality of 'his' military achievements. The public sensed correctly that the 1914 campaign in the west had been at best a job half done which lacked spectacular victories, but events in East Prussia compensated. Hindenburg appealed to deep-rooted German sensitivities regarding Russia which had been heightened by rumours of widespread Russian atrocities during their short-lived invasion of East Prussia, and his dubbing of the first great victory as 'Tannenberg' (a nearby village) took memories back to the defeat of the Teutonic Knights at the hands of the Polish king at the same Tannenberg/Grünwald in 1410. That defeat, Hindenburg held, had finally been redeemed with the expulsion of the latter-day Slavonic threat, the Russians, from Germany.

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With Hindenburg's media reputation secured and periodically reinforced by fresh interviews, he and his family circle, notably his wife Gertrud, turned to propagating his visual image through commissioned works by notable portrait painters. These portraits demanded lengthy sittings by Hindenburg, promoted field marshal in 1915, even as Ludendorff and Hoffmann fought the war. The resulting works attracted widespread popular acclaim and it did not stop there. Prints of the major portraits were churned out in varying size and quality, allowing households each to have their own Hindenburg portrait, a saviour figure resting on the hearths of great villas and millions of simple working-class homes alike. And as von Hoegen notes, it went beyond portraiture. Food products and household goods came to bear his name as Germany's war hero came to compensate for the essential anonymity of modern mechanized warfare.

The Emperor, both authors concur, lacked the gravitas and quiet reassurance that Germany yearned for and the avuncular Hindenburg, the 'strategic genius', filled this gap. He was not a man of grand manners and could put the simplest citizen, or the youngest admirer sent to deliver the great man a bunch of flowers, completely at their ease. He was said to possess a *Volkstümlichkeit*, a popular touch for which the German aristocracy was hardly famous and which served to round off his growing charismatic appeal. The media presented him as the guarantor of ultimate victory and the government and military came to understand that he had become an indispensable rallying point, a symbolization and personification of Germany itself in the midst of an increasingly desperate war.

Hindenburg, however, was not content to remain a symbolic figurehead. The history of Falkenhayn's dismissal as Commander in Chief in 1916 is well known, as is Hindenburg's appointment as his successor, with Ludendorff still in tow to deal with the practicalities of war. Likewise his career as Commander in Chief, which rapidly extended to involvement in the economy and significant control over civil government, will be familiar to most readers. Even the chancellorship eventually became his rather than the Kaiser's gift, in practice at least. For both authors Hindenburg's perception of his wider wartime political role and the substance that underlay this is of particular significance. From a relatively early stage in his military career Hindenburg had, as we saw, come to regard an organically integrat-

ed and united society as an imperative; a durable *Volksgemeinschaft* which would transcend the pursuit of sectional interests through political parties. In this regard the Marxist SPD appeared especially suspect, but Hindenburg was no more prepared explicitly to identify with the political right. When supporters of a victorious peace, who were simultaneously opponents of constitutional reform, created the Fatherland Party in 1917, Hindenburg refused to have his name attached to the organization as the 'Hindenburg Party'. It was confined to advocating a 'Hindenburg Peace' which the Field Marshal himself had repeatedly characterized as outright victory rather than mere survival.

As Pyta argues, he had embraced the notion defined by Max Weber as charismatic leadership, so according with a German collective susceptibility to embrace this mould of national saviour. Or as von Hoegen puts it, perhaps slightly mischievously, Hindenburg had become the 'Übervater der Nation' who combined the idealized stock virtues of bourgeois and soldierly Germany. If Hindenburg actively promoted such an image and role, von Hoegen confirms that the process was very much a two-way one as individuals and sections of society imposed their own idealized vision of the charismatic leader onto the figure of Hindenburg.

All of this left the Kaiser in a difficult position. Hindenburg's appeal was vital to the war effort and his authority might one day even serve to shelter the monarchy should a disappointing peace settlement prove necessary (and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg had tried in vain to get Hindenburg to underwrite a compromise peace in 1916). He had also become a dangerous rival to the monarchy itself. Matters came to a head in late 1917 as the army command and foreign office clashed over the peace terms to be imposed on the defeated Russians. The former's maximalist demands contrasted with foreign office plans to use a moderate eastern settlement as an opening gambit for peace talks with the western allies. The Kaiser sided with the more moderate line as a furious Hindenburg demanded a direct role in civil policy. Wilhelm II refused and Pyta argues that only Trotsky's abrupt suspension of peace talks (at which the Russians were, indeed, offered reasonable terms) averted open constitutional conflict in Germany. Hostilities resumed and thereafter the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk delivered Hindenburg the harsh settlement he yearned for by default.

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This should have been the trigger for Hindenburg's nemesis. His, or more accurately Ludendorff's resolve to use reinforcements from the east to break the Allies in the west during early 1918 and so secure outright victory failed. Both authors explore the processes and perceptions that allowed Hindenburg not merely to survive impending military defeat unscathed, but actually to enhance his political credit as a disaster partly of his own making unfolded. For one thing Ludendorff's twilight existence under Hindenburg's shadow had, ironically, come to an end during the great spring offensive of 1918. As von Hoegen notes, press coverage depicted this military adventure as the brainchild of both commanders, bringing the respected but disliked Ludendorff into the public gaze at the worst possible moment. During the autumn he took the rap for the final collapse whilst the much loved Hindenburg escaped direct blame. The revolution of 1918 consolidated Hindenburg's reputation, whereas Ludendorff was sacked at the insistence of the new civilian government on 26 October for undermining peace negotiations. Responsibility for the defeat and even for the army's meddling in civil politics was now heaped entirely on the former Quartermaster General as Hindenburg washed his hands of his former partner. Ludendorff always regarded this as an act of outright personal betrayal which was compounded by a whispering campaign, sustained personally by Hindenburg, that characterized Ludendorff as a man crippled by his own shredded nerves. The war effort, so Hindenburg's version of history asserted, had been held together by the unflappable, self-assured Field Marshal.

Hindenburg continued to show the same flexibility and ruthlessness as he played an instrumental role in the abdication of the Kaiser on 9 November. Wilhelm II was always to resent bitterly Hindenburg's part in engineering his flight into lifetime exile in the Netherlands, even if the Field Marshal was careful to shelter behind senior colleagues, notably Groener, at this critical moment. Betrayal of his Emperor, to whom he had sworn personal loyalty, remained a potential Achilles heel for Hindenburg throughout his remaining years. From time to time monarchist circles tried, unsuccessfully, to pin the blame for the Kaiser's demise on the Field Marshal, but as with the fabrication of his wartime mythological status, Hindenburg proved adept at engineering history to his advantage.

In any case, the public at large was less concerned and Hinden-

burg's willingness to remain at the head of the army during the sometimes stormy transition from monarchy to republic earned him praise even from Social Democratic circles as a man of the utmost integrity who had put duty to nation above political partisanship. All at once Hindenburg's reputation as a true servant of Germany and a man above the tangled web of day-to-day politics was secured. He had remained at his post for long enough to guarantee his reputation, yet his resignation hard on the heels of the Versailles Treaty dissociated him from the deeply unpopular peace settlement. A post-war Reichstag enquiry into the reasons for Germany's defeat had serious questions to ask of the wartime leader, particularly with regard to the 1917 U-boat campaign that had turned the United States against Germany, but massive public displays of adulation and support in parliament from the political right rendered the enquiry harmless. Indeed, Hindenburg turned the tables on the republicans by endorsing publicly the spurious claim that the home front, and not least organized labour and the supporters of a compromise peace, had undermined the war effort and so stabbed the armed forces in the back.

Whilst the political right toyed with notions of putting Hindenburg up for president of the new republic against the Social Democratic leader Friedrich Ebert, the Field Marshal continued to eschew any notion of party political partisanship and so turned down these early approaches. Behind this lay a personal agenda that is central to the rest of Pyta's narrative and finds reflection in the post-war media's reception of Hindenburg as detailed by von Hoegen. Pyta regards Hindenburg's deeply-held belief in the political virtues of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as central to his agreement finally to stand for the presidency in 1925. As von Hoegen observes, the liberal press in particular welcomed the new President's capacity to reconcile republicans and monarchists within the new constitutional order. For the latter he could serve as an acceptable alternative to the Kaiser, whilst even the Social Democratic press was soon reassured by his 'correctness' and capacity for political compromise.

That said, his efforts to enhance the role of his office at the expense of parliament during the early 1930s and, finally, his conscious and deliberate endorsement of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist movement in the months following Hitler's appointment as Chancellor are widely understood. Pyta dismisses entirely any notion that Hindenburg was significantly influenced by any third

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party before deciding to offer Hitler the chancellorship and is equally dismissive of the notion that the President's advanced age in any way impinged on his intellect or distorted his powers of judgement right up to the final fortnight of his life. Von Hoegen demonstrates how ruthlessly Hitler and the NSDAP instrumentalized and ultimately appropriated Hindenburg's charismatically-founded reputation in the months following January 1933, not least at Potsdam on 31 March 1933, but the characterization of Hindenburg as a 'nützlicher Idiot' appears, from a reading of Pyta's argumentation, to be wide of the mark.

Pyta traces events during the early 1930s, from the appointment of Brüning as Chancellor through to that of Hitler in painstaking detail, so reprising what is particularly familiar territory for historians of modern Germany. As President, Hindenburg had always accentuated the need for legal propriety. He respected the laws and usages of the republic from the outset and during the 1920s was also persuaded by his foreign minister, Gustav Stresemann, of the need for cautious revisionism and compromise in foreign policy. His endorsement of the Young Plan in this spirit earned him brickbats from Hugenberg's DNVP in particular. Similarly, the political right did not shy from heaping criticism on the President during Brüning's chancellorship (1930–2) when for Conservatives he appeared far too even-handed in his dealings with the various groupings across Germany's political landscape.

However, Pyta emphasizes throughout the centrality of *Volksgemeinschaft* to all Hindenburg's actions and decisions. Initially this did not accord the National Socialists any decisive role in the future, but once electoral logic had made National Socialist support indispensable for any legal change to the constitution, Hitler's prospects of high office improved dramatically. The problem remained of how legally to transform the Reichstag from a parliament where the individual parties held sway to a body subordinate to a government of 'national solidarity'. This government would be appointed directly by the President, purportedly in the interests of the perceived national whole, securing a system of authoritarian rule underpinned by plebiscitary acclamation of a kind advocated by the contemporary constitutional theorist Carl Schmitt.

Hindenburg was forced to accept the paradoxes of political life to secure his own political survival prior to Hitler's appointment. The

‘valuable national forces’ that had a role within his *Volksgemeinschaft* stretched from the Liberal parties, through political Catholicism to the Conservatives and, finally, the National Socialists. However, this putative bloc was torn by internecine strife and seemingly irreconcilable differences which left the President dependent on Social Democratic goodwill first to conduct parliamentary business on any terms and also to deliver up the votes that saw him defeat Hitler in the 1932 presidential election. His myopic view of the SPD, shared by many of his influential peers, was a fateful condition which, if he had considered matters more dispassionately, flew in the face of his personal dealings with Social Democratic leaders during the Weimar era. No Socialist leader abused him or made demands of him comparable with the spasmodic outburst of vitriol hurled at him by Joseph Goebbels among others. However, the Nazis claimed to represent the national whole, ultimately to encapsulate it, whereas the SPD in addition to its Marxist pedigree had, from the days of the revolution if not before, accepted its place and role within an open liberal parliamentary order—the very order Hindenburg abhorred.

In Pyta’s estimation, the leading players during the final months of Weimar, whether Hugenberg, von Papen, or von Schleicher, had more than an inkling of who Hitler was and what National Socialist rule would mean. Hitler’s popular support did have to be instrumentalized, but only to expedite their own monarchist or authoritarian agendas, rather than to hand him the keys to the front door. For Hindenburg the problem with Hitler, such as it was, centred on the crass discrepancy in their military rank and also on Hitler’s Austrian origins, for the President had never forgiven the Dual Monarchy its lamentable military performance during the Great War. However, in the days and weeks following Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor his confidence in Hitler grew to the point where he could perceive National Socialism as the legitimate embodiment of his personal notions of *Volksgemeinschaft*. Just as the Field Marshal had once dispatched his Emperor into the political and constitutional wilderness, he had dispensed ruthlessly with the services of his closest political allies and confidantes on the road to the Third Reich. First Brüning had been bundled from office in May 1932 and then von Papen was marginalized equally brusquely during early 1933 as each in turn became surplus to Hindenburg’s political requirements.

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The sound and fury of the National Socialist revolution of 1933 is densely researched terrain, but it emerges from Pyta's meticulous account how closely Hindenburg identified with Hitler's early initiatives, choosing to slip increasingly into the political background and leave his Chancellor to get on with the business of day-to-day government. The March 1933 Reichstag election results and the ensuing Enabling Act allowed Hitler to govern independently of the Reichstag, which accorded entirely with Hindenburg's hopes and expectations. This may have sidelined the President as much as parliament, but at no time did Hindenburg appear to question or regret this. Hitler was careful to leave him in ultimate command of the armed forces for his lifetime, and the President for his part was happy explicitly to sanction the purge of the SA and the murder of individual Conservative opponents of the Nazi regime in June-July 1934. The former Chancellor Kurt von Schleicher was among the dead, but his once deep friendship with Hindenburg ultimately counted for nothing. Only von Papen and the Stahlhelm leader Duesterberg may, perhaps, have owed their lives to Hindenburg's personal intervention.

Hindenburg died on 2 August 1934 after a chronic illness suddenly became critical and laid him low. He had taken care to complete his political testament which combined earlier biographical writings with claims that his toleration of Weimar and its key policies had always been no more than a veil for the creation of a German *Volksgemeinschaft*. Papen had helped him draft the final section of the testament, which effectively endorsed the NSDAP and Hitler as the worthy encapsulation of all he had sought since 1919. He would go to his grave, he declared, with every confidence in the future of the fatherland. The testament was handed to Hitler on 14 August and published two days later. A private letter to Hitler, never to be published, concerned the monarchy and its possible restoration, but Hindenburg had not pressed the point. It was of secondary importance to him at best and in effect he endorsed Hitler as the next head of state. The NSDAP put this elevation in Hitler's office to a plebiscite, with Goebbels exploiting to the full the contents of the late President's testament. His son, Oskar, broadcast to the nation endorsing Hitler's succession as in accordance with his father's wishes and, as von Hoegen observes, effectively excluding the monarchy from public discussion. Hitler, Oskar von Hindenburg declared, was com-

pleting his father's work. In a 90 per cent turnout, 90 per cent supported Hitler's appointment as head of state, now dubbed Führer rather than the parliamentary-sounding president.

Pyta's entire work is expertly crafted to avoid the wisdom of hindsight and to allow his readership to reach its own conclusions. Hindenburg does not come over as an entirely unsympathetic figure, particularly in his private life, and at times, especially during the Great War, his circumstances verged on the comical as he enjoyed lengthy hunting expeditions, his daily siestas, his media initiatives, and the sittings for his various portraits even as Germany's senior military commanders struggled to bring a desperate war to a successful conclusion. The adulation of the Field Marshal in the light of such modest achievements certainly exasperated Hoffmann and Ludendorff, and Hindenburg's defence that he and he alone would take the rap should military failure ensue proved hollow in 1918. By then Germany's military chief had become a consummate political operator. The later part of Pyta's biography, however, paints Hindenburg in an increasingly shocking light to the point where Hitler's rise to power and consolidation of his dictatorship threaten to become more the work of the President than the Nazi leader himself. If biographers of Hitler must see things differently, Pyta makes a full and convincing case to this effect, even if von Hoegen stresses more fully the Nazis' instrumentalization of Hindenburg's reputation and aura.

That said, history is full of maybes that should be given some limited houseroom in order to avoid an overstated determinism or the construction of over-ambitious, even reductionist teleologies. Stresemann's early death was a major and unanticipated blow against the republic—the economic blizzard of 1929–32 a more predictable disaster. Perhaps the parliamentary republic's fate was sealed by 1930, as many leading authorities have argued. Hitler's success was, however, less inevitable, and as late as 1932 many influential contemporaries had no inkling of the impending disaster. This, then, returns us to the concluding chapters of Pyta's work. By 1930 at the latest a more authoritarian Germany was certainly on the cards. Whether the state would have assumed a Bonapartist flavour, perhaps something vaguely comparable with the early French Fifth Republic under Charles de Gaulle or, possibly, seen the establishment of a regency and then the monarchy as many Conservatives

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preferred, must remain the stuff of conjecture. It would be overblown to lay the full responsibility for Hitler at Hindenburg's door, and neither author suggests such a thing. However, Pyta in particular argues convincingly that once the German electorate had done the initial damage, Hindenburg's role in producing Hitler as the desirable escape route from Weimar was crucial, even indispensable and, finally, anything but accidental. Thereafter, as von Hoegen observes, Tannenberg may have remained 'his' victory and his role as midwife of the Third Reich may have been acknowledged, but the Hindenburg myth itself became superfluous to the National Socialists, succeeded by a leadership cult crafted around Hitler himself.

CONAN FISCHER is Professor of European History at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. He has published extensively on the history of inter-war Germany, his more recent works including *The Rise of the Nazis* (2nd edn., 2002) and *The Ruhr Crisis 1923–1924* (2003). He is currently completing *Europe between Democracy and Dictatorship, 1900–1945* (forthcoming 2010).