



## German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918

Erich Ludendorff Admits Defeat: Diary Entry by Albrecht von Thaer (October 1, 1918)

This document captures the mood of the officer corps as they realized that the war was lost. Erich Ludendorff's (1865-1937) statements, as recounted by Albrecht von Thaer, also demonstrate the military leadership's predilection for faulting civilian forces on the home front for the German defeat. The military often blamed the lack of resolve in the domestic sphere for the course of the war rather than their own strategic mistakes.

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Terrible and appalling! So it is! In truth! As we were gathered together, Ludendorff walked into our circle, his face full of the deepest worries, pale, but with his head held high. Truly the figure of a beautiful German hero! I had to think of Siegfried with the deadly wound in his back from Hagen's spear.

He said approximately the following: that it was his duty to tell us that our military situation was terribly serious. It was possible any day now that there might be a breakthrough on the western front. He had to report this in the last few days to His Majesty. For the first time, the O.H.L.\* had been asked by His Majesty, as well as the Chancellor, what the O.H.L. and the army were still capable of accomplishing. In agreement with the Field Marshall, he had responded: the O.H.L. and the German army were at an end; the war could no longer be won; indeed, a total defeat could probably no longer be averted. Bulgaria had dropped out. Austria and Turkey, at the end of their strength, would probably follow soon. Our own army was unfortunately already badly infected with the poison of Spartacist-socialist ideas. One could no longer rely on the troops. Since August 8, things had rapidly gotten much, much worse. Some troops had proved themselves so continuously unreliable that they had to be removed from the front as quickly as possible. If they were replaced by troops with the will to fight, then these were greeted with the call "strikebreaker" and challenged not to fight any more. Ludendorff said that he could not operate with divisions which are no longer reliable.

Thus it was foreseeable that the enemy, assisted by the Americans who are eager to fight, would achieve a great victory, a very large, important breakthrough. Then the army in the west would lose its last foothold and flood back over the Rhine in complete dissolution, carrying with it the revolution to Germany.

This catastrophe had to be avoided at all costs. Because of the reasons just stated one could not allow any further defeat. Therefore, the O.H.L. has demanded from His Majesty and from the Chancellor that they immediately ask President Wilson of America to mediate an armistice with the goal of bringing about a peace on the basis of his Fourteen Points.

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\* O.H.L.: *Oberste Heeresleitung* or Supreme Army Command.

He had never shied away from demanding the utmost of his troops. But now that it had become clear to him that the continuation of the war served no purpose, he was of the opinion that it should be ended as quickly as possible, in order to avoid unnecessarily sacrificing the bravest ones, who are still loyal and able to fight.

It was terrible for the Field Marshall and for him to have to report this to His Majesty and the Chancellor. The latter, Graf Hertling, had immediately declared to His Majesty in a dignified manner that he had to resign immediately from his position. After so many years of working honorably he could not and did not want to conclude his life as an old man by submitting a request for an armistice. The Kaiser accepted his resignation.

His Excellency Ludendorff continued: "Therefore we have no chancellor at present. Who it will be is not certain yet. I have, however, asked His Majesty to include in the government those circles who are largely responsible for things having developed as they have. We will now see these gentlemen move into the ministries. Let them be the ones to sign the peace treaty that must now be negotiated. Let them clean up the mess they got us into."

The effect of these words on the listeners was indescribable! While Ludendorff was speaking one could hear a soft groaning and crying. Many, probably most of us, had tears running down our cheeks, involuntarily. I stood to the left of General Director General von Eisenhart. Involuntarily we held each other's hands. I almost squashed his.

After Ludendorff had spoken his last words, he slowly bowed his head, turned around and went in his adjacent room.

As I was to report to him afterwards in any event, I immediately followed him and – having known him for so long – grasped his upper arm with both of my hands, which I normally would not have dared to do, and said: "Excellency, is this then the truth? Is this the last word? Am I awake or am I dreaming? This is far too terrible! What is going to happen now?!"

I was completely beside myself. He remained completely calm and quiet, and said to me with a deeply sad smile, "Unfortunately it is so, and I see no other way out."

Source: Albrecht von Thaer, *Generalstabdienst an der Front und in der O.H.L. Aus Briefen und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen 1915-1919* [General Staff Service on the Front and in the Supreme Army Command from Letters and Journal Entries], edited by Siegfried A. Kaehler. Göttingen, 1958.

Original German text reprinted on <http://user.cs.tu-berlin.de/~ohherde/thaer.htm>

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey