

Interview with Dr. Jay Lockenour



Last year, [Dr. Jay Lockenour](#), Professor of History at Temple University and a CENFAD-affiliated faculty member, published his new book, [Dragonslayer: The Legend of Erich Ludendorff in the Weimar Republic and Germany](#) (Cornell University Press, 2021). CENFAD's Davis Fellow Ryan Langton met with Dr. Lockenour over Zoom to discuss his book. The complete interview can be viewed [here](#).

RL: Dr. Lockenour, thank you so much for joining me.

JL: Thanks for having me on.

RL: We will be talking about your new book, *Dragonslayer*, “The Legend of Erich von,” sorry not von, *The Legend of Erich Ludendorff in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich*. In the book's beginning, you talk about how you are adopting a biographical approach to Ludendorff, but you are also just as, if not more, interested in the mythos that was built



around him. For our readers and listeners, can you briefly explain Ludendorff's significance to German history and then talk about the legend that was constructed around him?

JL: Right, so there is a kind of straightforward story about Ludendorff that one could tell that involves his rise within the German military and the German General Staff, culminating with his position as the second-in-command of the third command of the German army during World War I. From 1916 to 1918 he was the first Quartermaster General, which was not a position that existed prior to Ludendorff. He sort of created it for himself to represent his position, technically, underneath Paul von Hindenburg, the head of the Supreme Command and the nominal commander, but Ludendorff was kind of the brains of the operation at a time when the German army was running the economy, the war effort, and diplomacy, and dismissing chancellors, and so forth. They were deeply involved in every aspect of German politics, economy, society, and Ludendorff was in charge. Several biographies of him refer to him as the “Dictator in the First World War,” so he's essentially the dictator of Germany from 1916 to 1918. That story is pretty well known....

What interested me was really his post-war career, which is usually dismissed in these biographies as him sort of going crazy. He does have a nervous breakdown, some sort of episode in the summer of 1918. I suggest that he relatively quickly recovers from that. Others have taken [his mental episode] to explain his disappearance, relatively speaking, from the scene. He starts flirting with right wing radicals, including Hitler, he was

involved in the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, but most biographers treat that as kind of an epilogue and see him kind of riding off into the sunset with his own little fantasies and demons. My book is trying to argue for his reinsertion into the Weimar Republic, his significance as at least a symbolic figure and for a while actually a practical political figure, and then as a symbolic figure embodying German fantasies of revenge for this war that they shouldn't have lost, according to many...

RL: That's a good transition to my next question. Because the book is partially a biography, it's a military history, it's a political history, but it also takes German culture very seriously, and that brings me to the title. It's obviously eye catching, but *Dragonslayer* refers not just to Ludendorff but to the Germanic legend of Siegfried. Could you go a little more into the legend of Siegfried, its importance in German culture at the time, and how it connects to Ludendorff?

JL: So, as someone who was an avid Dungeons and Dragons player as a kid and would love to play more if I had time and the crew to play with, having a book titled *Dragonslayer* was just a real treat for me, and it does connect directly to this story of Siegfried. Many people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries might be familiar with the story from Wagner's plays – the Nibelungen sequence – that he did in the nineteenth century. What I'm really referring to is the medieval epic poem *The Ring of the Nibelungen* that Wagner uses among other sources to create his story, but this medieval epic poem is different in significant ways and I think more directly connected to the

political culture of Germany and the Weimar Republic that I want to talk about. The story, briefly, is that the hero Siegfried is the son of a king, but he insists on making his own way in the world. He apprentices with a blacksmith, forges his own sword, and uses that sword to slay a dragon. After he kills the dragon he bathes in the dragon's blood, acquiring invulnerability much like Achilles being dipped in the River Styx, but a linden leaf is resting on his back while he's bathing and that makes this one spot vulnerable, sort of like Achilles's heel.

He goes on to marry the most beautiful princess in the land and becomes influential in the court of Burgundy, which is the most powerful kingdom at the time, and that inspires jealousy among many of the courtiers and they conspire to kill him. They learn of his weakness and during a hunt they stab him in the back, and this is another one of the

connections to the Ludendorff story. Ludendorff was the author of the stab in the back myth, the notion that the German army hadn't been defeated in the field but had been stabbed in the back, betrayed by the home front, by socialists, by Jews... That was another direct connection to the story, this idea – a mighty hero who is invincible, basically, except for this one vulnerability that these evil assassins take advantage of, coincides with the way [Ludendorff] liked to tell the story of the First World War.

And then [there's] the second half of the Siegfried story. There are two films that come out in 1924 directed by Fritz Lang. The first is called *Siegfried's Death*, and the second is called *Kriemhild's Revenge*. Kriemhild is Siegfried's wife and she plots this decades-

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long plan to seek revenge on the assassins. The story ends in a blood bath in the court of Attila where she has lured these Burgundian nobles to their deaths and gets revenge for Siegfried. There's an element of that, too, with Ludendorff's second wife and her spiritual project to renew Germany and seek the recovery of German strength.

There were all these coincidences, and it occurred to me in an archive when I was reading through some right-wing German newspapers. One of them had the headline "Ludendorff is our Siegfried." I was like, "Oh my God!" I had done enough of the work beforehand to have all that sitting in my mind somewhere, and that headline just brought that all out in a big rush, so I thought that's the hook that I can use to tell this story, which I wasn't going to be able to tell as a straight biography...

RL: Right, the book is not a straight biography because it's also about the history of the world of stories and ideas that Ludendorff finds himself in after World War I... Does Ludendorff recognize himself as a kind of Siegfried? Does he inculcate this himself? What different myths does he try to perpetuate around himself?

JL: I've done several of these interviews. I love to watch the interviewers try to describe the book that way because it reflects the difficulty I had in selling it to publishers. I couldn't sell it as military history because they're like, "Well, where's the Galician campaign?" and it just wasn't about that. It is a biography in the sense that he's born, he has a career, he gets married, he dies – that's there, but what I have done is try to pull out the elements of the story that he and his followers later use to build this "Siegfried" story. It's not that he dressed up and actually believed he was some sort of incarnation [of Siegfried], but he and his wife and his followers were tapping into this – and others, other people in the military who were

not really part of his personal project contributed to this in meaningful ways. It is the way that these earlier stories resonate with what he thinks is going to sell books and gain him political power in the Weimar Republic, ways in which they coincide with the Siegfried story, which has an enormous resonance. [The legend of Siegfried] has been described as the German *Iliad*, this medieval epic poem, in that every educated German read this book in gymnasium, in high school, so that everyone was intimately familiar with the story. I mentioned the Fritz Lang films in 1924 – they were enormously popular. He was tapping a really lively, rich source of Germanic national legend and character, and then attaching it to himself through these stories about himself. With respect to his childhood, [Ludendorff] emphasizes his non-aristocratic background. I love that you made the gaffe at the beginning of calling him Erich von Ludendorff – totally common and understandable.

RL: I reminded myself before not to do it...

JL: But it just rolls off the tongue.

RL: Exactly, and for those not as familiar with twentieth-century German history, you recognize the name and it's like a reflex, you assume there is a "von" there.

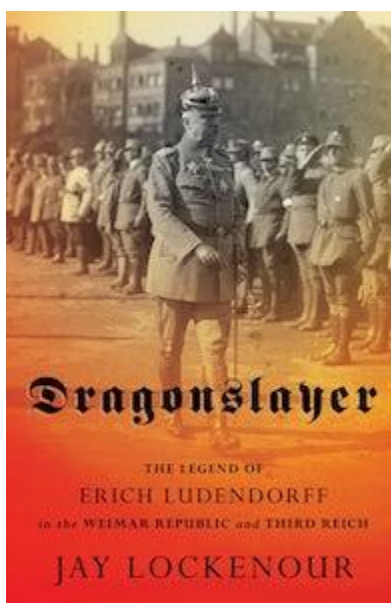
JL: There are plenty of academic books, scholarly works that replicate that. He was *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year" in the 1930s and they put a "von" on his name in the title. So it's a common mistake, but anyway he was proud of that upbringing. He's in an institution that was dominated by the aristocracy and the monarchy until 1918, and yet he succeeds beyond many people who have this upbringing, the connections, and so forth, that he does not have. Like Siegfried, who is a prince but makes his own way in the world, Ludendorff tells that self-made man story...

I'll emphasize for people who know a little bit about Ludendorff – he personally becomes increasingly isolated [after the war]. People cannot stand to be around him. I was around him for ten years, and I can't stand it anymore. He's really irascible, he's dogmatic, he's really hard to get along with, and so by the end of his life there aren't very many people in his inner circle. But I argue that his legend is powerful beyond all that, and the book that I rely on – I don't know if you've read it but some listeners might have read it – is [Ian Kershaw's *The "Hitler Myth,"*](#) which is a book that is outstanding and predates Kershaw's famous two-volume biography of Hitler by many years. In fact, he argues in *The "Hitler Myth"* that Hitler's biography isn't important. I always thought it was kind of ironic that the guy who writes the definitive biography of Hitler had made an earlier case for Hitler's biography not being important. The idea is that Hitler has this persona that Goebbels and Hitler himself and others build up around him that operates in German political culture somewhat independent from the person of Hitler himself, who can occupy this lofty position detached from the everyday politics of Germany in a way. Yet, this myth motivates, energizes, [and] instructs people at all levels of German society and politics. Ludendorff is not at that level of significance but I argue that it's a similar kind of thing that operates to promote this fantasy of revenge, this politics of national regeneration and military power.

RL: Can you talk about how Germany's defeat in the First World War played into the story of Ludendorff as Siegfried? Who

exactly did this myth identify as the people who stabbed him in the back?

JL: ... Something happens with the defeat, I think partly out of personal necessity to explain how [Ludendorff] managed to fail because he was so closely associated with the war effort by the end that defeat was really a personal failure. Whether for complicated psychological reasons, for purely opportunistic political reasons, he had to adopt an increasingly extensive and complicated conspiracy theory involving Jews, Freemasons, and Catholics. It's not uncommon, there were other people promoting similar kinds of conspiracies, but they come together for Ludendorff in a particularly concentrated way. Many groups like the Nazis are more closely associated with anti-Semitism. There were elements of anti-Masonic sentiment in the Nazis as well; certainly anti-Catholicism is partly there too. But Ludendorff really took this to an extreme and began to



explain, not just World War I, but all of German history and European history and world history by the operation of these conspiratorial globe-spanning groups – the Vatican, what he referred to as “*Juda*” or this notion of an international Jewish conspiracy, and then Masons.

It almost defies rational explanation. I tried and ultimately failed – at various moments these various groups work together to suppress German power, and sometimes they're competing against each other. In some ways the Catholics are a part of the Jewish conspiracy because, to Ludendorff and many like him, Jesus was a Jew and therefore Christianity as a whole is suspect and part of this Jewish conspiracy to delude Europeans and Germans into following this

pacifist Christianity. It evolves, it changes over time and there are internal contradictions that make it really difficult to explain rationally.

Nevertheless, those are the targets of his ire. In some ways, the anti-Semitism was not surprising, it was increasingly widespread in Germany and the Nazis obviously pursue that to a certain conclusion, but for Ludendorff in a strange way the Catholics are more of a problem. He ends up spending a lot more energy and time concentrating on Catholics. The Jews never disappear [from his writings] but I think partly because of his living in Bavaria, and so forth, his main target became the machinations of the Pope and the Vatican... Just to finish this off, what I think is one of the real zingers of the book, particularly for people who don't know Ludendorff's story very well, is that after failing to win as a presidential candidate for the Nazi party in 1925 he breaks with the Nazi party and begins to argue that the Nazis are part of a Jewish conspiracy to destroy Germany. In fact, [Ludendorff argues] that Hitler was soft on the Jews, that because he was raised Catholic he had been brainwashed as a child because the Catholics are part of this Jewish conspiracy, so that Hitler ultimately was coddling the Jews and was paving the way for Jewish control of Germany. [Ludendorff's conspiracies] become anti-Nazi but for an even more radical anti-Semitic position in some ways...

RL: How did you initially approach researching Ludendorff's life and how did your discovery of the Ludendorff-Siegfried connections change your researching method?

JL: The original idea was to do a more traditional biography. I naively thought that would be relatively easy. The timeline is laid out for you – birth, life, death. You just talk about that and then you're done. I began, partly for convenience sake, with some of his

writings because they were readily available. I wasn't ready to go to Germany yet, so I could use various libraries here. Penn has a Jewish archive that has a lot of anti-Semitic publications by Ludendorff and his press – he had a publishing house later – so I began in some ways where it ended with Ludendorff telling his own story. I struggled because I wasn't getting that biographical material from any other source, really. His childhood is described – his aunt wrote a book about his childhood, he wrote a book about his childhood, eventually. Those were the limits of my sources, so without a kind of archival base I struggled and felt a little bit at sea until I found [the article describing him as Siegfried]. This is an example I use with graduate students all the time, the idea of serendipity. We get that lucky break, that headline that just makes it all click suddenly about what the book is actually about. But if you haven't done the spade work in advance, haven't just done tons of reading and gone to archives and seen what's there and what's not there, you are not ready for that moment. I had done enough work with the microfilm that is available at Penn and books I could get through our interlibrary loan along with some archival explorations to have that moment where I was like, "Oh, that's it. It's a story, not just about his biography, but also about the legend that he builds out of his biography."

Then, I started to make the connections to Kershaw's method in *The "Hitler Myth"* about telling the story of how he tells his story and what does that mean that he tells the story the way he does. That's where the Siegfried legend became a part of it, and I start each chapter with an epigram usually from that epic poem that then links in some way to the chapter that follows and provides an organizing principle that I could use. Then it was really about these different elements of his career, as a putschist or person trying to overthrow the government, as a military commander, as a spiritual leader in the

League for the Germanic Understanding of God that his wife creates. The organization began to suggest itself around the elements of this legend...

RL: Are you working on any new projects?

JL: Yes, so COVID has interfered, but I did manage to get back to the archives this summer to work on a project on sports and the military. It's still pretty ill-defined at the moment, but it grows out of my dissertation. This is a lesson, too. The Ludendorff book ultimately is based partly on a paper I wrote as a senior in college.

This project is based on an anecdote from my dissertation related to sports and veterans organizations. The military spends an enormous amount of money, energy, and time fostering sports programs, not just

among soldiers, but in the broader public as well in order to create healthier recruits and so forth. There are a lot of assumptions about the value of sport to build physical fitness and camaraderie and teamwork and aggressiveness and competition – there's a whole litany of virtues that sport is supposed to bring. At a certain level that's indisputable, but there is not a whole lot of concrete evidence that this is true. Sports injure people, coaches abuse athletes, and sports build xenophobia – so there are other kinds of possibilities that aren't quite as rosy. By exploring military engagement with sport, I am hoping to reflect something about not only sporting culture but military culture and why the two seem to go together so well. I am starting with Germany, so I am looking at East and West Germany after the Second World War, and then my hope is that I can expand it to other places where my language skills apply – to France, England, maybe the United States as well. I'd love to do Eastern

Europe but I just don't have the language ability. It's kind of a transnational history of sport in the military.

Right now, what I am working on immediately is an operation that was put on by the United States Army during its occupation of Germany called "German Youth Activities," and what that amounted to was – GIs were stationed in Germany and had particular skills, and they were often sports skills. They were encouraged to engage with German youth clubs and clubs were created to facilitate this engagement.

There were often baseball teams, basketball teams, they played football and soccer, and went on hikes and other kinds of things. So sport was an important part of the American occupation project. It was an important part of the re-

establishing of West German legitimacy after the war by engagement with international sporting competitions and so forth. The military played an important role in all of that. That's the early description of it. It's really exciting, it's an entirely new field in many ways, and sports history has its own journals and its own conferences that I've never been to, so there's a huge learning curve.

RL: That sounds really interesting, especially because sports history is a budding, blossoming field for critically analyzing sports and how it interacts with the political, social, cultural phenomena that we would focus on when studying anything else, but somehow sports gets left out – sports is set aside as a different thing from culture when it very much isn't.

JL: One of the things that got me started on this is a book, probably ten years old now,

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Strategic Visions: Volume 22, Number I

by Franklin Foer called, [*How Soccer Explains the World*](#), it's like ten chapters that take on globalization, racism, the Olympic movement...and talks about the connection of sports to society, economy, politics, religion, all that other stuff. In some ways it's similar to military history in the sense the military history can have all those other connections if you pursue them. It's also similar in that there is a huge relatively large public market for sports history, and the vast majority of what's published is really bad, like military history. There's a lot of bottom dwelling, lowest common denominator stuff that gets published and read and sold in military history and sports. There's also a lot of really excellent work in both fields. Part of the pleasure has been seeking that out, and figuring out that there are people, lots of people, really doing amazing critical work in sports history like there are in military history.

RL: Dr. Lockenour, thank you so much for your time.

JL: You're welcome. It's a pleasure.