

You Can't Print That!

George Seldes



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"U.S. Infantry Won the War"

In the marble castle of Wilhelmshohe an aide-de-camp took us upstairs. A squat stoutish man in a regulation general's uniform with an additional white cloth around his head, received us.

"General Groener," he said to each, snapping his feet. We shook hands.

"The general hasn't been wounded?" queried our spokesman.

"No," he smiled, "but I have a terrible headache."

Our spokesman interpreted. "He has a terrible headache."

"He should have," whispered the roughneck among us. "He has just lost a world war."

General Groener bowed us into the next room, marvellous, rococo, pale blue and gold and palatially uncomfortable.

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Hindenburg arose.

He was dressed in field grey-blue. Tall, red-faced, broad-shouldered. The usual officer's decorations on the wide chest were absent. Around his neck, unbuttoned for comfort, was the small blue cross of the *Pour le merite*. His head was covered with stiff toothbrush-like white hairs, cropped to about a half-inch, and revealing, by their scarcity, a very pink scalp. But what I thought was funny, was the famous Hindenburg moustache. It looked theatrical. It looked false, and stuck on, and it certainly curved itself along the cheeks as no non-Thespian moustache has ever done.

"Die Herrschaften sprechen Deutsch, nicht wahr?" said Hindenburg in a kindly smiling voice, shaking hands for the first time since the war with men in the uniform of his enemies.

Three disclaimed speaking German so Hindenburg fixed on our spokesman, motioned us to a circle of chairs, and began:

"I will answer any military questions. I am a soldier. But I refuse to answer any political questions." He shrugged his shoulders. "I am a soldier."

We had previously discussed no questions for this interview — it was one of those cases where any word given us, on any subject, was precious.

"Is the demobilization proceeding satisfactorily — we have heard of some fighting and bloodshed." Our first question.

"Yes," he replied, "although there is some trouble when the men come to the cities, the return from the front is fully disciplined. Men and officers remain in their usual relationship. The troubles are not serious among the troops, officers and civilians, except when there is an attempt to disregard the present change in government."

"What is your position at present?"

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"I have given my pledge to Mr. Ebert, who is in control of the government in Berlin, that I will stay in command until all the troops are safely returned from the front and to their home barracks. My functions then cease. I have finished my duties. I mean to retire into private life."

"Do you think the present socialist government will remain or will fall soon?"

"I cannot answer that. I am not a politician. I am a soldier."

Several questions followed. Either of minor importance or of a political nature.

"I cannot answer. I am a soldier," was the inevitable reply to the latter category.

All these minutes undoubtedly each of us was steeling himself for another question — a question we were burning to ask, and which was merely "Who won the war?" heavily muffled in diplomatic garments. We fell to debating "the next question" among ourselves, and finally someone said:

"Go ahead — ask him — you know what."

So the spokesman with considerable throat clearing and much redundancy, asked it.

When we asked "Who won the war?" we were ignorant of what home papers had said. Our American papers in France, like the Entente press, from October to November 10th reported nothing but French, British, Italian, Belgian victories. "British troops advance 20 miles," "Brussels captured," "Lille entered," "Italians cross three rivers." The three armies northwest of us had advanced many miles each day. City after city was captured by them. But what was the American army doing all this time? Merely fighting. Yes, fighting. In the Argonne. Through dense, almost impassable forests, over cliffs and hills, wading in ravines, struggling through mud thick

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as boiling rubber, bombing, hand-grenading, machine-gunning, bayonetting their way northward towards the jugular of the German armies, the Metz-Longuyon railroad, the one means of retreat of the enemy.

Hindenburg was shortening his lines. He was quitting northern France and Belgium. But he was holding the Argonne. Day by day the representative of our G. H. Q. had shown us the map with every enemy division and reserve force marked. Hindenburg had thirty-two reserve divisions at the beginning of our Argonne drive. When November began two or three remained. What had become of an army of German reserves?

Very few had appeared on the French or British front — almost all were thrown against us. We were doing almost all the fighting while the Allies were marching unhindered into famous cities and famous battle fields of 1914, and capturing the headlines of the world. We were losing men and taking prisoners and trenches — fighting most of the war then and getting no credit from the press because our work was not spectacular. Hindenburg and Pershing knew what we were doing. What would Hindenburg say?

"I will reply with the same frankness," said Hindenburg, faintly amused at our diplomacy. "The American infantry in the Argonne won the war."

He paused and we sat thrilled.

"I say this," continued Hindenburg, "as a soldier, and soldiers will understand me best.

"To begin with I must confess that Germany could not have won the war — that is, after 1917. We might have won on land. We might have taken Paris. But after the failure of the world food crops of 1916 the British food blockade reached

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its greatest effectiveness in 1917. So I must really say that the British food blockade of 1917 and the American blow in the Argonne of 1918 decided the war for the Allies.

“But without American troops against us and despite a food blockade which was undermining the civilian population of Germany and curtailing the rations in the field, we could still have had a peace without victory. The war could have ended in a sort of stalemate.

“And even if we had not had the better of the fighting in the end, as we had until July 18, 1918, we could have had an acceptable peace. We were still a great force and we had divisions in reserve always which the enemy attacks could never use up completely.

“Even the attack of July 18, which Allied generals may consider the turning point in the war, did not use up a very important part of the German army or smash all our positions. To win a war it is necessary, as you know, to place the enemy forces *hors de combat*. In such a manner of warfare which began when Japan and Russia met in the wheat fields of the Far East, you must engage and defeat hundreds of thousands, millions of men.

“In the summer of 1918 the German army was able to launch offensive after offensive — almost one a month. We had the men, the munitions and the morale, and we were not overbalanced. But the balance was broken by the American troops.

“The Argonne battle was slow and difficult. But it was strategic. It was bitter and it used up division after division. We had to hold the Metz-Longuyon roads and railroad and we had hoped to stop all American attacks until the entire army was out of northern France. We were passing through the

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neck of a vast bottle. But the neck was narrow. German and American divisions fought each other to a standstill in the Argonne. They met and shattered each other's strength. The Americans are splendid soldiers. But when I replaced a division it was weak in numbers and unrested, while each American division came in fresh and fit and on the offensive.

"The day came when the American command sent new divisions into the battle and when I had not even a broken division to plug up the gaps. There was nothing left to do but ask terms.

"Until the American attack our positions had been comparatively satisfactory. We had counted on holding the Argonne longer. The advantage of terrain was with us. The American troops were unseasoned. We had also counted on their impetuosity. There was great wastage in your army due to carelessness, impetuosity and the disregard of the conditions of modern warfare.

"Yet from a military point of view the Argonne battle as conceived and carried out by the American Command was the climax of the war and its deciding factor. The American attack was furious — it continued from day to day with increasing power, but when two opposing divisions had broken each other, yours was replaced with 27,000 eager for battle, ours with decimated, ill-equipped, ill-fed men suffering from contact with a gloomy and despairing civilian population.

"I do not mean to discredit your fighting forces — I repeat, without the American blow in the Argonne, we could have made a satisfactory peace at the end of a stalemate or at least held our last positions on our own frontier indefinitely — undefeated. The American attack decided the war."

A moment of silence.

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"*Ach, mein armes Vaterland — mein armes Vaterland —*"

Hindenburg bowed his head and tears flooded his pale, watery eyes. His huge bulk was shaken. He wept for his "poor fatherland."

We sat and wondered over so much emotion in a military leader supposedly devoid of sentiment and sentimentality.

Thus the interview terminated with a strange human spectacle and in an uncomfortable silence. A fallen Colossus. A broken Superman. Blood and iron suddenly tears and clay.

* * * * *

There was no more to ask. Here we were with the biggest story in the world, and even before Hindenburg was through speaking, our thoughts were searching cable ends or messengers or some new means of communication with our papers.

There came the usual anticlimax. "Where do you go from here?" asked Hindenburg. "Ach, Berlin, so? Well, *glückliche Reise.*"

"*Auf Wiedersehen.*" A loose handclasp. We were ushered out by the snappy aide-de-camp.

My colleagues started for Berlin; I got up at four the next morning to make the 5 A.M. train for Luxembourg. As I reached the station I saw part of the real German revolution.

Mingled with the monarchist flags and drapery over the Cassel railroad station and triumphal arches were red streamers and bunting placed by the revolutionary sailors and town Soviet. The troops coming by train knew nothing of the Kaiser's cowardice or the change to a republic.

A regiment was detraining. As the colonel led his men from the station into the public square he seemed lightning-struck when he beheld the revolutionary color mingling with his Kaiser's.

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"Tear the red rags down!" he ordered his captains.

A captain in turn spoke to his men, who refused to move.

"I'll do it myself," said the captain, and grabbing a red streamer from the triumphal arch, he pulled.

Two soldiers with red arm-bands approached threateningly, and I stopped too.

"Pardon, captain," said one, "but we have had a revolution."

"Revolution, to the devil —" replied the captain, pulling.

The two soldiers raised their rifles.

The captain drew his pistol.

Click! — Crack!

At this precise moment the little experience I had had in the Luneville-Baccaret section with the Rainbow Division, pulled my habit muscles. I dropped flat.

A dozen rifles and a pair of revolvers snapped. A man fell partly on me. I turned cautiously on my left side. His face was in pain, and his hands were at his middle, and blood was flowing from his stomach. He was the captain who had pulled the red flag. The soldiers had shot him.

Men ran over us, around us. Lying flat, I had a panorama of flying feet in the semi-darkness. Shooting was spasmodic, now near, now at a distance. I wondered what I could do for the man lying over my feet. I pulled myself up. I think he died without a groan.

Bodies were writhing in the open square. One wounded man was shrieking. But the troops were gone and scared civilians were appearing from hiding places and the station.

"Too bad," they murmured, "but these officers won't believe the guards who tell them there has been a revolution — and a republic."

In three days and three nights the train meandered a hun-

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dred miles. It was crowded with German officers who mistook me for a returning prisoner of war and who were kindlier than any German civilians and who gave me their precious bad bread.

At Wasserbillig, the Luxembourg frontier, was the most welcome sight in the universe: a doughboy. He got me a car to Luxembourg. I was promptly arrested. Pershing insisted the German government return my colleagues from Berlin, and our trial at Chaumont followed.

I have seen Hindenburg since. No longer the broken old man weeping. Nor quite Hindenburg of the iron-nailed statue. But times had changed in Germany. Seven or eleven political parties were bitterly fighting for power, and the old monarchists and the old militarists were spreading the myth that the war was lost, not by Wilhelm's armies, but by the republican *Dolchstoß* — the civilian "stab in the back."

I recalled the Cassel meeting. Hindenburg shook his head in acknowledgment.

But for political reasons he can never again repeat his confession of Armistice week.