

# Paul von Hindenburg's Testimony before the Parliamentary Investigatory Committee ["The Stab in the Back"] (November 18, 1919)

## Abstract

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The "stab-in-the-back" legend [*Dolchstoßlegende*] was a central theme of the nationalist right-wing propaganda that targeted Weimar democracy and the parties that basically sustained it – the Social Democratic Party, the German Center Party, and the German Democratic Party. According to the legend, the defeat of the German Empire in 1918 had been caused by the revolution on the home front. The notion that the German army had been "stabbed in the back" gained greater traction in public discourse after the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* published a December 17, 1918, report in which newspaper articles by the British general Frederick Maurice were deliberately misquoted. During his testimony before the Parliamentary Investigatory Committee on November 18, 1919, former General Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg read a declaration that he had formulated with Karl Helfferich and Erich Ludendorff. In it, he specifically cited the "stab in the back" as the reason for Germany's defeat. He failed to mention blunders made by the empire's political and military leadership – not to mention the army's high command.

## Source

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[...]

*General Field Marshall v. Hindenburg:* History will render the final judgment on that about which I may give no further details here. At the time we still hoped that the *will to victory* would dominate everything else. When we assumed our post we made a series of proposals to the Reich leadership which aimed at combining all forces at the nation's disposal for a quick and favorable conclusion to the war; at the same time, they demonstrated to the government its enormous tasks. What finally became of our proposals, once again partially because of the influence of the parties, is known. I wanted forceful and cheerful cooperation and instead encountered failure and weakness.

*Chairman:* That, too, is a value judgment, against which I must enter a definite protest.

*von Hindenburg:* The concern as to whether the homeland would remain resolute until the war was won, from this moment on, never left us. We often raised a warning voice to the Reich government. At this time, the secret *intentional mutilation of the fleet and the army* began as a continuation of similar occurrences in peace time. The effects of these endeavors were not concealed from the Supreme Army Command during the last year of the war. The obedient troops who remained immune to revolutionary attrition suffered greatly from the behavior, in violation of duty, of their revolutionary comrades; they had to carry the battle the whole time.

*(Chairman's bell. Commotion and shouting.)*

*Chairman:* Please continue, General Field Marshall.

*von Hindenburg:* The intentions of the command could no longer be executed. Our repeated proposals for strict discipline and strict legislation were not adopted. Thus did our operations necessarily miscarry; the *collapse* was inevitable; the revolution only provided the keystone.

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(Commotion and shouting.)

An English general said with justice: “The German army was stabbed in the back.” No guilt applies to the good core of the army. Its achievements are just as admirable as those of the officer corps. Where the guilt lies has clearly been demonstrated. If it needed more proof, then it would be found in the quoted statement of the English general and in the boundless astonishment of our enemies at their victory.

That is the general trajectory of the tragic development of the war for Germany, after a series of brilliant, unsurpassed successes on many fronts, following an accomplishment by the army and the people for which no praise is high enough. This trajectory had to be established so that the military measures for which we are responsible could be correctly evaluated.

[...]

Source: Paul von Hindenburg, “The Stab in the Back” (November 18, 1919), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. 1994 Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press, pp. 15–16. Reprinted with permission of the University of California Press.

Source of the original German text: *Stenographischer Bericht über die öffentlichen Verhandlungen des 15. Untersuchungsausschusses der verfassungsgebenden Nationalversammlung*, vol. 2. Berlin, 1920, pp. 700–01.

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