

Wilhelm Groener on Erich Ludendorff (October 12, 1918)

Abstract

Wilhelm Groener (1867-1939) was born in Württemberg and joined the military straight after leaving school, where he soon made a career for himself. During the First World War, he was promoted to lieutenant general and appointed deputy minister of war in the Prussian Ministry of War in November 1916. However, he came into conflict with the Supreme Army Command (OHL), whereupon he was transferred to the front. Groener wrote this letter of October 12, 1918, excerpted here, to his wife Helene from Kiev, where he was acting as Chief of the General Staff at the time. In addition to his criticism of Ludendorff's lack of political skill, this document also sheds light on the fact that Groener, as a high-ranking member of the military, was well aware of the ill-informed decisions made by the German military and political leadership, which had caused the war to be unnecessarily protracted. When Erich Ludendorff was dismissed as First Quartermaster General two weeks later, on October 26, 1918, Groener took over his role as de facto commander of the OHL at the end of the war.

Source

Kiev, October 12

[...]

I fully share your views; in particular, I also believe that the brilliant victory that fate had pretended would be ours in August 1914 would not have been to our benefit. But the fact that the war lasted more than four years and will now end in such a way that it comes close to defeat was not inevitable; we have ourselves, our folly and hubris to blame. For years and years my great concern has been that Ludendorff would overstretch our strength, as has now happened. Ludendorff, whom I hold in high esteem as a soldier, unfortunately never had any understanding of psychological effects and consequently just as little understanding of politics. He believed he could give orders where this was not possible, and unfortunately had many young, immature minds (and older ones too) in his environment who did not act favorably, who rushed him to show so-called energy where it was necessary to weigh things calmly and with forethought. Of course, they also wanted to remain in his favor by this sharp demonstration of energy, which they easily succeeded in doing, since Ludendorff is not a great judge of character and is easily taken in when things are presented to him with loud, energetic-sounding phrases. – Old Hindenburg, who possessed many of the qualities that Ludendorff lacked, in particular an Olympian calmness, could have complemented Ludendorff if the latter had not been the far stronger personality. Thus, although outwardly the Hindenburg-Ludendorff marriage appeared to be a brilliant one, Hindenburg's opinions were too weak and Ludendorff's too strong to make a true commander. Each of them was not a commander in his own right; the right mixture was lacking for the perfect combination of a commander – unfortunately a thousand times over. Insightful people and insiders had therefore been worried for a long time. – Fate did not place the only general and statesman that Germany has had since Bismarck at the head of the German army; old Schlieffen took the secret of the man of Sedan, the secret of victory, to his grave. – In Alten's *Lexicon* (upstairs in the large bookcase on the outer shelf) there is a splendid article on "the general," written by old Schlieffen. I'm sure you'll be interested to read it. [...]

Source of original German text: Wilhelm Groener, letter to his wife, Bundesarchiv, N 46/32, No. 89:

pp. 222-222; reprinted in Wilhelm Groener, *Von Brest-Litovsk zur Deutschen Novemberrevolution, Aus den Tagebüchern, Briefen und Aufzeichnungen von Alfons Paquet, Wilhelm Groener und Albert Hopman, März bis November 1918*, ed. Winifried Baumgart. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971, pp. 443-44.

Translation: GHI staff

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