

Review: Kirsten Zirkel, *Vom Militaristen zum Pazifisten. General Berthold von Deimling – eine politische Biographie*, Essen, Klartext, 2008.

Despite the fact that General Berthold von Deimling (1853-1944) was a very well known and controversial figure in Wilhelmine Germany and the Weimar Republic, today he is largely forgotten, even among specialists in German (colonial) history. Deimling's questionable reputation prior to 1914 rested on his highly successful military career, not least among his achievements was ending the Nama War in German South West Africa in 1906/7, and his standing as a hard core militarist and monarchist, who despised parliamentarianism and opposed any attempt to subject the armed forces to civilian control. After 1918 Deimling proved to be a pacifist and democrat. Kirsten Zirkel succeeds convincingly in reconciling these two apparent opposites in his life in her elegantly written and excellently researched biography.

Deimling was born in the Grand Duchy of Baden, a kind of democratic model state in 19th century Germany, into a liberal minded family of pastors and civil servants with no soldierly traditions. He started his military career in the aftermath of the Franco-German war of 1870/71, when the reputation of the Prussian army reached unprecedented heights. From the beginning he was an enthusiastic and extremely ambitious soldier, loyal to the core to the Hohenzollern monarchy. Despite the fact that he did not possess the preferred social background of the

Prussian officer corps and hence had no privileged connections to the military establishment, Deimling advanced rapidly. Thus his career is a clear indication that the German army in the Wilhelmine period at least partly sponsored advancement based on merit rather than the right (usually aristocratic) pedigree of young officers. By 1901 Deimling, now a lieutenant colonel, was head of one of the military operations departments of the German general staff under Count von Schlieffen. This was one of the most promising positions the German army could offer to younger officers aiming for the highest posts. But Deimling's self-confidence and individualism, which would be decisive factors throughout his life, soon ended this chapter after he dared to contradict Schlieffen when he criticised Deimling's skills in commanding troops.

It was the Herero and Nama Wars in German South-West Africa from 1904 to 1907 which introduced Deimling to a wider audience in Imperial Germany and bestowed upon him the confidence of the emperor, thus giving his fledgling military career new impetus following his removal from the general staff. Deimling was no old African hand who had built his career on colonial service, but, like most officers in the Imperial German army, he preferred to serve in Germany and only volunteered for the colonies when the major uprisings broke out. In 1904, promoted to colonel, he became commander of a regiment sent from Germany to South-West Africa despite the fact that he had no overseas experience. He fought in the Battle of the Waterberg in August 1904 under the command of Lieutenant General

Lothar von Trotha. At the beginning of the Nama War in autumn 1904. Deimling took over the command of the German forces in the south of the colony. But again, as was the case on manoeuvres under Schlieffen and during the Battle of the Waterberg (and later in the First World War), Deimling proved to be a less than perfect leader of troops at the front when he faced the Nama. Here the book is somewhat disappointing as the author does not really discuss the Deimling's apparent shortcomings as a front commander, nor does she try to balance these failures against other potential military qualities (apart from Deimling's repeatedly mentioned "brennender Ehrgeiz") which could explain his highly successful career as a soldier. In the end, the Nama war helped Deimling's career because in 1905/6, after having succeeded Trotha as the commander in chief of all forces in South West Africa he defended uncompromisingly the necessity to expand the budget for the war in Africa in the Reichstag. This behaviour earned him the esteem of Wilhelm II, who sent him back to Namibia with the brief to end the war as soon as possible and by any means. This time Deimling's preference for individual solutions and pursuing his own goals paid off: In September 1906, without consulting Berlin he secretly brokered a peace with the Nama tribes using missionaries as mediators. He only informed his superiors of the fait accompli but the emperor and the future secretary of state for the colonies, Bernhard Dernburg, were only too happy to have been rid of this constant strain on Germany's military

and financial resources. According to Zirkel Deimling, in contrast to most other officers serving in German South West Africa, was neither a racist, nor driven by any personal hatred towards Africans who had dared to rise up against the colonisers. Hence he was more liable to seek to resolve the conflict by negotiation rather than by subjugation. That Deimling decided to end the war in this way, as Zirkel argues convincingly, cannot be seen as a first indication of Deimling's hidden pacifist tendencies which were to emerge after the First World War. Deimling's decision was simply a result of a sober assessment of the military situation in Namibia and the costs it would involve for Germany to continue the war. Deimling, promoted after the end of the hostilities to the rank of major general, immediately returned to Germany as pacified colonies did not offer military positions high enough to appeal to ambitious and high-ranking officers like him.

The years 1907 to 1914 would make Deimling infamous in Germany as a ruthless commander in Baden and Alsace, the sensitive border region between France and Germany. He ranted against pacifism, warned against alleged planned French aggression and he publicly accused the Alsatians of lacking loyalty to Germany. Deimling's behaviour on the eve of the First World War earned him few friends among the press, political parties or in the Reichstag, but it secured him the support of Wilhelm II, who made him commanding general of the Strasbourg army corps in 1913. Being a die-hard defender of military prerogatives,

Deimling played an important role in the Zabern affair in December 1913. This affair, named after the Alsatian town of Zabern, was the most telling conflict between the military and the civilian authorities over who would have the dominant influence in Germany during peace times. As Zirkel makes plain by her meticulous research, the affair would never have achieved such nationwide notoriety, had not Deimling, as the highest military authority in Alsace, endorsed and even instigated the high-handed behaviour of his officers towards the civilian population. Whereas many officers considered the inhabitants of this province to be pro-French and thus unpatriotic, the German civilian authorities in Alsace tried to calm the situation and protect the inhabitants from intimidation by the military.

The First World War would be the turning point in Deimling's military career. As a commander on the Western Front he repeatedly ordered attacks without consulting his superiors. Worse, these resulted in most cases in military setbacks with many pointless casualties for the units involved. Therefore the German high command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff forced him to retire in 1917. This humiliating experience combined with the fact that Wilhelm II went to exile in November 1918 without putting up a fight to preserve the throne, transformed Deimling profoundly. He would become one of the very few staunch supporters of the Weimar Republic among the high ranking officers of the former imperial army which also helped to keep him in the public domain in the new era. In

1919 Deimling joined the left-liberal Deutsche Demokratische Partei (DDP), thus connecting with his liberal Badenese family roots which he had abandoned for decades after joining the Prussian army in 1871. He also became probably the best known representative of the German peace movement, lobbying relentlessly for disarmament, international cooperation, Germany's entry into the League of Nations in the 1920s and from the mid-1920s onwards also occasionally for a general decolonisation instead of the restitution of Germany's former colonies, a claim still popular even within the DDP. Zirkel compares him with the few other known examples of officers who underwent a metamorphosis into democrats and pacifists after 1918, such as Hans Paasche or Paul von Schoenaich. She finds some similarities in their lives, notably a strong individualism already apparent during their military careers, the courage to take unconventional decisions and previous clashes with the military establishment resulting in career setbacks.

The fact that Deimling was a converted general made him an important spokesman of pacifism and republicanism, drawing huge crowds to his speeches in public. But this stance also attracted the hatred of his former army comrades who excluded him from all veterans' organisations. It would also result in his complete silencing in the Third Reich although he escaped direct political persecution due to the fact that he was now too old to pose a threat to the regime and because he had not exercised a political office after 1918. Deimling, as an arch-militarist and

monarchist turned pacifist and democrat, was certainly a cause celebre in Weimar Germany. But at the same time his influence remained limited as Zirkel clearly shows. Not only did the DDP decline rapidly after 1920 but the peace movement in Weimar Germany also always remained a marginal phenomenon. Deimling himself never could shake off the military socialisation which had left its imprint on him for more than 40 years. Still under the spell of the Wilhelmine soldier's deep mistrust of any thing that smacked of politics, Deimling, like most of the other pacifist officers after 1918, never aspired to any leading political posts in the DDP, in the peace movement or as an MP. His strong individualism and often idiosyncratic views on various political issues also limited his influence in the organisations he had subscribed to.

Zirkels' biography endeavours admirably to do justice to such a difficult and, at first sight, not very pleasant character as Deimling. She neither glorifies him nor does she take away his dignity as a historical personality. In the chapters dealing with the years after 1918 she occasionally overplays Deimling's historical importance. But this is the pitfall of every biographer who has to plead the case for a historical personality who is largely forgotten today but who has left a large paper trail in the archives suggesting a very significant role back then. The reviewer would have liked some more information about the personal life of Deimling even though the sources on this aspect are sparse according to Zirkel. To give an example: the reader is only informed in passing towards the

end of the book about Deimling's long and apparently very happy marriage and that he had fathered two children. Nevertheless the two extremes into which his Deimling's life seemed to have fallen plausibly reconciled in this engaging book. According to Zirkel Deimling's transformation in 1918/19 was a logical outcome of his character traits which he had developed from his early days on and not the result of a split personality. The protagonist comes alive as being idiosyncratic, self-confident, ambitious, hard-working and eager to attract publicity. At the same time he lacked diplomatic and intellectual subtlety and had difficulties relating to other people. He was essentially a loner, whether in his life as a soldier or as a campaigner for peace and democracy.

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