

The Legend of the Last Hussar. The Myth of August von Mackensen in Context of the Weberian Categorization of Political Rule

Abstract:

The analysis of the life and career of August von Mackensen in context of the theory of authority postulated by Max Weber attempts to answer important questions regarding the clash of traditions, charisma and modernity in the Imperial German Army in particular, and its assessment by German society in general. Mackensen was not only one of the most successful military commanders of the First World War, but also a military officer who had the opportunity to witness the development of the new pieces of technology introduced to all armies of the world. Furthermore, as a member of the German General Staff and a commander of large military units, he had a unique opportunity to witness the impact the social changes of the *fin de siècle* and the Great War had on the customs and conventions of the Imperial German Military. The latter also sheds light upon the evaluation of cavalry as an independent branch of arms within the ranks of the Kaiser's forces, as Mackensen himself started his career as a cavalryman and retained a considerable degree of affinity for the branch during his entire life. Analysing the career of the so-called Last Hussar using the Weberian categories of authority reveals that although the devotion of Mackensen to the traditional principles and values adhered to by the German military elite, especially the cavalry, and his exploitation of his own considerable charisma certainly contributed to the image the field marshal acquired over the years of war, none of his greatest achievements would have been feasible without the tools and methods of industrial warfare.

Keywords: August von Mackensen, Imperial German Army, Max Weber, First World War, cavalry

Introduction

Both history and sociology have dealt with the military and its members. Their ability to influence the creation and working mechanisms of the ruling elite in general and the role of armed forces in the forming of the leading strata of singular societies in particular have been subject of several studies and inquiries. Whether we think of the bellicose statism of Treitschke, Heinze or Schmidt, the Italian elite theory of changing elites and their ideologies by Praeto or Mosca, sociology has been striving to find an answer to questions concerning the possibilities and opportunities of armed formations to form the politics in which they were established, at least as often in context of internal struggles resulting from the strengthening of certain classes as regarding international conflicts.¹

In a similar vein, history has been analyzing armies as entities having a profound impact on the development of humanity by being a decisive factor in the ability of one society to impose its will upon others or to maintain the *status quo*. The subject seemingly calls for an all-encompassing, grand-scale examination of actors and scenarios. However, the recent trend of investigating history by dwelling into the microcosm of individual persons, communities and/or events may provide new opportunities for an inductive discovery of the impact certain military figures had on the fate of their environment.²

This is not to imply that sheer historical focus on particular generals, officers or even common soldiers would have been unheard of. Both high-ranked military leaders, such as Helmut von Moltke the Elder or Bernard Montgomery, and rank-and-file combatants, for example, Ernst Jünger, were subjects of historical scrutiny.³ Yet it might also become apparent that these studies tend to lack results which would possess wide-reaching sociological

¹ Heinrich von Treitschke, *Historische und politische Aufsätze. Vierter Band: Biographische und Historische Abhandlungen, vornehmlich aus der neueren deutschen Geschichte* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1897); Otto Hintze, *Wesen und Verbreitung des Feudalismus (= Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1929); Gaetano Mosca, *Sulla teorica dei governi e sul governo parlamentare: studi storici e sociali*. (Palermo: Tipografia dello Statuto, 1884); Vilfredo Pareto, *Compendio di sociologia generale*, (Florence: Barbèra, 1920); Robert Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie. Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens* (Leipzig: Werner Klinkhardt, 1911).

² See, for instance, Peter Fassel, Wilhelm Liebhart, Wolfgang Wüst, eds. *Groß im Kleinen – Klein im Großen. Beiträge zur Mikro- und Landesgeschichte. Gedenkschrift für Pankraz Fried* (UVK Konstanz: Verlagsgesellschaft Konstanz, 2013); Carlo Ginzburg, *Der Käse und die Würmer. Die Welt eines Müllers um 1600* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1979); or Giovanni Levi, *L'eredità immateriale: Carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del Seicento* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1985).

³ See Terence Zuber, *The Moltke Myth: Prussian War Planning, 1857–1871* (Lanham – Maryland: University Press of America, 2008); Nigel Hamilton, *The Full Monty. Montgomery of Alamein 1887–1942* (London: Allen Lane, 2001); Matthias Schöning, *Ernst Jünger-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2014).

implications. Again, some exceptions are worth mentioning, such as the issue of the role played by Lord Herbert Kitchener in the creation of the concentration camps during the Second Boer War or the Rommel Myth about the supposedly brilliant, apolitical military leader of the Third Reich.⁴ Nevertheless, even considering these counterexamples, only the second one can be considered a research topic bearing sociological relevance due to the topic being relatively common-knowledge.

Yet the creation of such a blend of military microhistory and sociology is not an inherently futile endeavor. One way of achieving it may be choosing a set of fundamentally important sociological theories and trying to apply them in the case of a soldier with an impactful role during a conflict important for the society he originated from and who, at the same time, can be seen as a figure representative enough of the conditions of said society to be used as an archetype of the beliefs and customs still prevailing within it.

The Weberian trichotomy of traditional, charismatic or legal-bureaucratic systems provides an adequate sociological framework for the inquiry.⁵ Its chronological order provides researchers an excellent opportunity to examine these, while the overlapping nature of the categories allows us to track the spectrum of development within societies, from aspects which went through profound changes to factors left untouched by time.

Field Marshal August von Mackensen may be an ideal candidate for conducting such research. Not only did he serve through most of his career in the cavalry, widely considered to be the most traditionalist segment of armies up until the Second World War, but eventually became one of the most celebrated members of the military elite of the Kingdom of Prussia and the German Empire, receiving such distinctions as a regiment and a battlecruiser bearing his name. Although a large part of the historiography concerning him focuses on his role in the Third Reich, his rise to fame might also provide us plentiful opportunities to find an answer to several questions with both historical and sociological significance in context of the Weberian social theory of authority.

First, what role did a non-noble background play in gaining high rank and status in the military in late 19th-century and early 20th-century Prussia? Second, how did the position of Mackensen as a cavalry officer influence his rise in the military hierarchy of his country and his attaining the status of a *de facto* national hero? Third, considering the case of the general, to which degree are the Weberian categories suitable for describing the opportunities of gaining military fame in Prussia in the period in question?

⁴ For a relevant example of the former, see Hector Ribeiro, "Did The Confinement Of Boer Civilians In Concentration Camps By The British Army During The Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) Constitute An Act Of Genocide?" *Nationalities Affairs New Series*, 2020/52. Article No. 2274. For the latter, see, among others, Alaric Searke, "Rommel and the rise of the Nazis," in *Rommel Reconsidered*, ed. I. F. W. Beckett (Mechanicsburg: PA, 2014), 7, 26.

⁵ Siniša Malešević, *The Sociology of War and Violence*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 25-28.

The short biography of Mackensen

Anton Ludwig Friedrich August Mackensen, nobilitated as von Mackensen in 1899, was born on 6 December 1849. His father, Ludwig Mackensen, by training a lawyer, was an administrator of estates, held in high regard by the Prussian landowning nobility. His mother, Marie Mackensen, née Rink, was the daughter of a forester. Although he began his secondary education in Torgau, he soon transferred to the Realgymnasium in Halle at the behest of his father, who hoped that August would follow in his footsteps as a farmer and administrator. In spite of not having been drafted due to his frail physique, he was ultimately allowed to enter the Prussian 2nd Life Hussars Regiment as a volunteer. The unit saw action during the Franco-Prussian War, in which Mackensen distinguished himself during several reconnaissance missions. As a recognition of engaging enemy forces while leading a patrol north of Orléans, he received the first military decoration of his life, the Iron Cross 2nd Class, from Prince Albert of Prussia. Following the war, he returned to Halle to continue his studies of agricultural sciences at the Martin Luther University, while also assisting his father in his farming duties. However, the young man, who had always been fascinated with cavalry, longed to return to the military. His father's resistance finally broke when he received several letters of recommendation from officers his son had served under during the war. He resumed his career in the army, now as a professional officer. His seminal work, *The Prussian 2nd Life Hussars Regiment during the War against France*, not only earned him the praise of many fellow soldiers, but was probably also an important factor in his entering the General Staff without having attended the Military Academy in Berlin in 1882. In 1891 he became the Adjutant of the Chief of the German General Staff, Alfred von Schlieffen. Two years later, he was given command of the 1st L Regiment, and in 1903 he was promoted to the rank of *Aide-de-camp* to Kaiser Wilhelm II himself.⁶

With the outbreak of the First World War, Mackensen, now the commander of the XVII. Army Corps, took an important part in expelling the Russian forces from East Prussia in 1914. The zenith of his career came probably with his appointment as the commander of the newly created 11th Army, which inflicted a severe defeat on Russia during the Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive. This victory brought him the rank of Field Marshall. Later, he was dispatched to the Balkan Peninsula to subdue the fierce resistance of Serbia, a feat beyond the abilities of the Austro-Hungarian forces alone. Finally, following the entry of Romania into the war on the side of the Entente, he succeeded in capturing most of the country with the newly created Army Group Mackensen.⁷

Nevertheless, the collapse of the armies of the Kaiser on the Western Front and the subsequent revolution in Germany stripped him of the joy of his triumphs. Mackensen could return to his homeland only after an exhausting

⁶ Marcus Funck, "Feudales Kriegertum und militärische Professionalität. Der Adel im preußisch-deutschen Offizierkorps 1860 – 1935," (Ph.D. diss., Technische Universität Berlin, 2003) 38-39.

⁷ Ibid., 42.

ordeal and while his reputation as a war hero was unshakable, his monarchist views were irreconcilable with the toppling of the Hohenzollerns and the rule of the Social-Democratic Party. This may have been behind his unquestionable support for the NSDAP and later the National-Socialist regime, even though he disapproved of the brutality the latter employed both in domestic and foreign affairs. Mackensen died on 8th November, 1945.⁸

The Newcomer. The Mackensen myth and the traditional paradigm

The first category of authority described by Weber is that of traditional rule. It is characterized by an elite which bases its rule on long-standing customs attributing to the rulers a supposedly inherent ability to lead their communities, frequently of purportedly divine origin and often without any attempt to justify the existence of the system with logical or legal arguments. Although Weber distinguishes four different forms according to their degree of pluralism, according to him, not even the developed feudalism of the High Medieval Era provided much opportunity for outsiders to gain entrance to the elite and maintain their position within it.⁹

Although the traditional paradigm may seem the least relevant for researching the life of Mackensen, not least because Weber himself applied the model mostly in the case of pre-modern societies, the peculiarities of Prussian society in particular might justify its consideration in relation to the Field Marshal.

Prussia, purportedly characterized by Honoré-Gabriel de Mirabeau as “not a state with an army, but an army with a state”,¹⁰ held strict expectations for those who wished to enter its officer corps. One of these was proper lineage. Militarism and nobility were going hand-in-hand since the era when the North German state had been in the process of altering its status as the insignificant backyard of the Holy Roman Empire. The decrees of Friedrich Wilhelm I succinctly declared the nobility to be the cornerstone of his reign and its duty to serve its country as commanders in his army. Noblemen were forbidden to serve in the armed forces of other states and lists were compiled of all the sons of noble families aged between twelve and eighteen years.¹¹ Numerically speaking, even during its most liberal eras, namely during the reforms initiated by Scharnhorst and Boyen in the first quarter of the 19th century, approximately 54% of Prussian officers were of noble origin. The prospects for middle-class soldiers were even dimmer in senior military positions, where the predominance of noblemen remained a distinct feature: in 1860, 35% of the Prussian Army officers were bourgeois, while their proportion among colonels and generals was 14%. Even though

⁸ Funck, “Feudales,” 44.

⁹ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922), 130–140.

¹⁰ The quote itself has never been connected to Mirabeau beyond doubt.

¹¹ Christopher M. Clark, *Iron Kingdom: the Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 98.

the overall share of the latter certainly increased by 1913 (to 70%), the majority of high-ranked officers (52%) were still selected from the pool of the old aristocracy.¹²

Correspondingly, those who intended to make a career by serving under the black-and-white banner were exposed to the expectations of a group which had retained several archaic habits from the age when the traditional model was predominant. Several instances were recorded about Junkers¹³ speaking disparagingly about those who failed to follow the customs of “proper” hunting (a treatment not even the Kaiser was exempted of) or owners of large estates east of the Elbe who refused to acknowledge even their equality, let alone inferiority to prosperous middle-class entrepreneurs, even though the material wealth of the latter rather frequently surpassed that of the their own.¹⁴ The consequent disdain towards non-nobles was detectable even in cadet schools, where, as Ludendorff himself had the opportunity to experience, students of bourgeois origin were deprived of the privileges their noble peers were entitled to.¹⁵

Similarly, multiple accounts report how children were familiarized with the traditions of the old Prussian military aristocracy at a very early age, at times without regard to their gender. Adda von Liliencron, the daughter General of Infantry Karl von Wrangel and grandniece of Field Marshal Friedrich von Wrangel, recounts in her memoirs her participation in taking an oath to the flag of her father’s regiment as a teenager, and her father telling the story of the coat of arms of the family:

“Once my forefather stood in front of his liege lord in a black armor and defended him from the onslaught of a superior foe with his trusted shield and a torrent of blows. (...) In the name of the officers of our regiment as well as in that of our troops I am addressing you as an oath of fidelity that we will stand about this banner as a wall, standing shoulder to shoulder, amid the hail of bullets.”¹⁶

Similarly, most of the notable noble families of Prussia labored to present (often dubious) evidence of a member who had encountered or even

¹² Dierk Walter, *Preussische Heeresreformen 1807–1870. Militärische Innovation und der Mythos der »Roonschen Reform«* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1997), 197.

¹³ The term originates from Middle High German *Juncherre* (literally meaning young lord), originally used for knights who arrived in Northeastern Europe as armed escorts of local rulers during the German colonization of the area. Their descendants became wealthy landlords, the political influence of whom in Prussian and German politics remained decisive up until 1918.

¹⁴ Stephan Malinowski, *Nazis and Nobles. The History of a Misalliance*, trans. Jonathan Andrews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 65.

¹⁵ Helen Roche, *Sparta’s German Children. The Ideal of Ancient Sparta in the Royal Prussian Cadet-Corps, 1818–1920, and in the Nationalist-Socialist Elite Schools (the Napolas), 1933–1945* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2013), 41–42.

¹⁶ Adda von Liliencron, *Krieg und Frieden. Erinnerungen aus dem Leben einer Offiziersfrau* (Berlin: R. Eisenschmidt, 1912), 47–48.

spoken to Friedrich the Great, the seductive Queen Luise, Wilhelm I or Bismarck.¹⁷

Another important aspect of the Weberian traditional rule, the veneration of rulers, also seems to have been an inalienable part of the Prussian noble and military classes. The emotional account of Paul von Hindenburg about Wilhelm I ordering a few cadets to his royal residence and asking them to tell him the names and ranks of their father and how “some of us were unable to get hold of our voices, and when this happened, words poured out of them unintelligibly” can be dismissed as the natural overreaction of young men to meeting their sovereign in person.¹⁸ Yet other examples indicate a greater degree of admiration. Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck describes the reaction of Karl von Steinmetz to having been reprimanded by the monarch as “my dear king has scolded me” and briefly mentions his company chief in his cadet years who “did not let his injuries hinder him from marching in front of his king, proudly swinging his legs shot through by bullets into the air.”¹⁹

In no other branch of arms was this tight entwining of soldiers of age-old pedigree and military service more apparent than within the ranks of the cavalry, the very department Mackensen so longed to enter. According to data available from 1885, merely five out of 72 Prussian cavalry regiments were led by officers of middle-class origin, while articles of the *Berliner Tageblatt* estimated the proportion of noblemen among cavalry officers in 1909 to be 80%. Richard Schmettow, a lieutenant and an *aide-de-camp* of the 1st Guard Hussar Regiment noted that the unit “received its supply of men, up to the few cantonists whom were to be trained by the regiment, primarily in the form of volunteers from the countryside of West and East Prussia, many of whom had a generation-long affiliation with the formation.”²⁰

How does this all apply for Mackensen himself? The image the future commander constructed about the military in his youth is certainly rooted in the environment he had grown up in. He put a substantial effort in refuting rumors about a possible Scottish heritage and describing the history of his family from the first male ancestor known by his first name, an illustrious example of land-based nationalist sentiment. He also emphasized the importance of values bequeathed on him by August Hermann Francke, a Lutheran theologian and an important figure of the Pietist movement, the spirit of whom “had planted the love towards God into the hearts of his disciples, the love in which I and my five years younger brother, Viktor, were raised.” Furthermore, Mackensen mentioned how he had acquired his love towards Wilhelm I from his father, a subscriber of the paper *Kreuz-Zeitung*, the header of which depicted an iron cross with the motto “With God for King and Homeland.”²¹

¹⁷ Funck, “Feudales,” 77.

¹⁸ Paul von Hindenburg, *Aus meinem Leben* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1920), 14.

¹⁹ Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Mein Leben* (Bierbach an der Riss: Koehler Verlagsgesellschaft, 1957), 24.

²⁰ Wolfgang Foerster, *Mackensen: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen des Generalfeldmarschalls aus Krieg und Frieden* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1938), 21; *Berliner Tageblatt*, 11 February 1909, no. 38.

²¹ Foerster, *Mackensen*, 9.

However, the importance of the traditional segment of the Weberian model regarding the Mackensen myth lies not specifically in his adherence to customs prevalent in a traditional society as described by Weber. Rather, it manifests itself in the odds these posed, against which the son of a middle-class family was able to acquire such a legendary status within the most traditional branch of the army. The Weberian concept of feudalism, as mentioned above, does not necessarily render the entry of outsiders into the system impossible, especially in its later stages, when rulers require more developed forms of administration and thus the expansion of their clientele. Nevertheless, it does presuppose strong relations between lord and liege, either by blood or by affinity. The Mackensen family, although not poor by the standards of the era, lacked this deep bond with the aristocracy.

August's very own father, to begin with, was highly skeptical of his son's prospect as a professional soldier, especially as a cavalryman.

"Seeing it gave me enough courage as a twelve-year-old boy to visit my father in his working room, regarded by us children with a certain degree of fear, and to announce that I wish to be a hussar, an officer of the Prussian hussars. I will never forget his answer, succinctly expressed by a disappointed look and a dissatisfied shaking of his head. He was not caught by much surprise about my desire for the life of a soldier rather than that of a farmer. However, the thought of me wanting to realize this dream under our humble conditions and without any meaningful connection to the army was something my father dismissed as nothing more than a delusion of youth."²²

Ludwig Mackensen was not alone in his doubts about his son's intentions. August received a pair of small pictures from his roommates with the inscription "Feldherr"²³ above it on the occasion of his graduation from Gymnasium. The first half, with the inscription of "Ideal", depicted a hussar general leading his troops on a charge, while the second segment, with the inscription of "Reality", portrayed a farmer in the company of women spreading dung and servants being occupied with ploughing the soil.²⁴

Mackensen justly saw his ennoblement in 1899 and his subsequent appointment as *aide-de-camp* four years later against all these odds as a final token of his integration into the higher echelon of Imperial German society. Not only did he choose a motto for his newly established kin which he hoped would always remind him of his origin, but it is at least possible that the later field marshal was not above strengthening his newfound position within the Prussian nobility through marriage. His first wife, Dorothea von Horn, was not only the sister of a fallen fellow hussar, but the daughter of the former member of the Prussian State Council and later *Oberpräsident* of the Province of Posen (renamed East Prussia in 1878). He was 22 years Leonie von der Osten's senior, whom he married in 1907, two years following Dorothea's death.

²² Foerster, *Mackensen*, 19.

²³ The pun stems from the fact that the word in its dictionary meaning refers to a military commander, but it is, in fact, a compound, which makes the more literal interpretation as 'field lord' also possible.

²⁴ Foerster, *Mackensen*, 19.

The decision was both frowned upon (among others, by the general's elder son) and defended (by Empress Viktoria Augusta), but its most important aspect was probably the further connections Mackensen formed with the East Prussian Junker society, as Leonie's father, Leopold von der Osten, was both a member of the upper house of the Prussian Parliament and one of the richest landowners of Eastern Pomerania.²⁵

Mackensen seems to have adopted the practice of unquestioning loyalty towards his sovereign. The officer's almost hagiographic description of the Kaiser as a comely, responsible leader whose attempts to govern his country in the right direction were disturbed, first and foremost, by democratic forces attempting to limit his power bears testimony about the power the remnants of Weberian traditionalism had over Prussian society.

"His political acumen, which over the course of my service I had a plentiful of occasions to witness, provided him with clear awareness of the danger the ship of the state was constantly enclosed by. The concern about the success of the voyage lay heavily upon the helmsman, a worry accompanied by the feeling of being bound by his oath as a constitutional ruler, which imposed serious limitations on his ability to fully exploit the capacity of his will and strength."²⁶

The meteoric rise of the son of a simple administrator from southern Prussia within the military hierarchy of the Second Reich did not escape the attention of the imperial court and the German public. Demonstrating well how uncommon the career path of Mackensen was, the phenomenon, undoubtedly aided by the officer's uncanny resemblance to Wilhelm, gave rise to rumors of him being an illegitimate son of the late Frederick III.²⁷

Of course, this is not to imply that the Last Hussar grew up and began his career in a society which completely fits the definition of Weber about traditional authority. He certainly did not become part of an elite solely responsible for the administration of the community. Germany, just as most Western countries by this era, had a large number of bureaucrats of middle-class origin at its disposal. Neither was it at the mercy of the arbitrary decisions of its rulers or the remnant of its feudal elite, owing to its constitution and strong rule of law. Yet the fact that a low-born was able to cement his position within the ranks of said remnant proves another Weberian tenet. This is the fact that the three categories rarely can be observed in complete isolation from one another, and certain elements of one form might continue to live on, even if others have disappeared over the course of time. In this case, this aspect was the influence of the old Prussian nobility, especially within the army and the cavalry, and its coexistence with modernity.

Having analyzed the effect of traditional rule on the chances of him gaining a place among this aristocratic group, it is now worth examining the

²⁵ Theo Schwarzmüller, *Zwischen Kaiser und "Führer." Generalfeldmarschall August von Mackensen. Eine politische Biographie* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), 77–78.

²⁶ Foerster, *Mackensen*, 26.

²⁷ Schwarzmüller, *Zwischen Kaiser und Führer*, 61.

talents Mackensen had to use in order to acquire and maintain his position. Since these were mostly his abilities to exert significant charm and appeal onto those around him, usually by mastering skills required from a noble cavalrman, it provides us an excellent opportunity to assess the applicability of the second Weberian category: charismatic authority.

The Horseman. The Mackensen myth and charismatic authority

Charismatic authority, according to Weber, is similar to the traditional one in certain aspects. The ruler's legitimacy frequently stems from reverence to certain purportedly supernatural phenomena, while also lacking any kind of rational foundation. Some of the most apparent differences are the greater role of the leader as an individual and that the organization of the system often does not exceed that of patrimonial rule, the most primitive form of traditional governance. The ruler does not gain their position through a certain sort of inheritance, as dictated by custom since time immemorial. Rather, their authority is based on one or several feats deemed to be impossible to accomplish by most of the society they wish to lead. Therefore, their power is inherently personalized and, should they fail to find an heir equally respected by their followers, the arrangement they created is doomed to ultimately crumble. Were they successful in this enterprise, their rule inevitably transforms into traditional or bureaucratic authorities.²⁸

Similarly to the traditional model, one might wonder whether the charismatic paradigm is fully applicable to Prussia or the German Empire. After all, as mentioned above, the overwhelming majority of the states in Europe during the period in question had developed well-functioning bureaucracies based on decisions led by rational judgement, even if traditional elements, as demonstrated before, did pertain to an extent. Yet it was exactly this latter aspect in which personal appeal did remain an important factor in advancing within both military and civilian hierarchies.

Just as in the case of the traditional paradigm, the segment of the armies of the era most closely entwined with the concept of charisma was probably cavalry. Certainly, there were numerous figures belonging to infantry, artillery or naval units who have earned considerable fame in late modern Europe or North American history, such as Nelson, von Buchmüller or Ernst Jünger. Yet quite probably no other military branch ever earned the distinction of retaining its importance in large part due to the ethos and tradition associated with the soldiers serving in it. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that the branch of arms most commonly associated with traditional warrior nobility produced, as a legacy of European knighthood, the ideal of the dashing, rule- and quite often death-defying horseman who rushes into battle in a valiant charge, often to a decisive effect. In concert with Weber's ideas of the leading strata having to resort to charisma to cement their position in their societies, the mounted fighter remained a cultural icon even the armies and societies of the most developed industrial societies were reluctant to get rid of.

²⁸

Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 140–150.

Prussia was no outlier in regard of revering cavalrymen. One of the most celebrated idols of Prussian military history, Friedrich Wilhelm von Seydlitz, had both the reputation of a rash womanizer and a heavy drinker and that of the hero who succeeded in turning the tide of the battle of Rossbach on 5 November 1757, dealing a crushing defeat to the superior French and Austrian forces with a daring maneuver against the flank of their advancing cavalry.²⁹ The line of charismatic men on horseback continued other legendary figures. General Gebhard von Blücher, the hussar officer who was able to gather Prussian commoners around his banner of uprising against French domination (against an explicit order of King Friedrich Wilhelm III), and later commanded regular Prussian troops in famous clashes such as the Battle of Leipzig or the Battle of Waterloo.³⁰ Likewise, the infamous ‘Death Ride’ of Friedrich von Bredow, successfully launched against entrenched French artillery positions during the Battle of Mars-la-Tour in the Franco-Prussian war, which may have convinced a copious number of officers and military theorists, both in Prussia and elsewhere, that cavalry actions still had an important role on the battlefield. Although the practical military effect of these events is not to be denied, what probably contributed to the survival of this division of arms in a century when its waning efficacy in shock tactics became obvious quite early and which saw the development of ever more accurate and far-reaching firearms and artillery technology was the age-old principle of respecting personal heroism and combat prowess.³¹

The mythos of cavalry in particular and that of the soldier capable of astonishing feats in general saturated entire generations of Prussians from their early childhood. Adda von Liliencron not only grew up listening to stories about her granduncle’s exploits during the Napoleonic Wars, but in spite of being the daughter of an infantry officer, regularly received riding lessons from her father, which seems to have planted a distinct affinity for horses in her. Analogously, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, the renowned commander of the German forces in Southeast Africa, recalls in his memoirs how his grandfather, who was “an old guard uhlan officer, played the piano expertly and theater productions, music and dancing were common during family feasts he attended.” He also mentions that his mother, although she was better known for being “clever, of good character and helpful in nature” and for the fact that “her faith never left her in her lifetime”, “was a good horsewoman, even though her interests lay rather in household matters.”³²

Neither were the highest echelons of Imperial German society resistant to the charm of bold, at times even flamboyant mounted warriors who were

²⁹ Roman Johann Jarymowycz, *Cavalry from hoof to track* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), 70–71.

³⁰ Michael V. Leggiere, *Blücher: Scourge of Napoleon* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014); Peter Young, Michael Roffe, *Blücher’s Army. 1813–1815* (Oxford: Osprey Publishers, 2002).

³¹ Dierk, *Preussische Heeresreformen*, 152–156; Jarymowycz, *Cavalry from hoof*, 112–113.

³² von Lettow–Vorbeck, *Mein Leben*, 16.

capable of achieving admirable results even without resorting to any form of violence. Wilhelm II himself recorded that during a miners' strike in Westphalia in 1889, he benefited greatly from the help of a former comrade from the Life Guard Hussars' Regiment, a certain von Michaelis. According to the Kaiser, he "was well-known for his jokes. He rode around the mass of striking workers (...), alone and unarmed. He understood immediately how to utilize his trust-evoking and jovial manners to conduct a harmless conversation with the workers. By asking and answering questions, he obtained valuable information about what the strikers felt worried about, either with justification or not. He soon gained the trust of the workers and succeeded in calming down the whole sector."³³

It is therefore no wonder that the most important link between the Mackensen myth *per se* and charismatic authority is also cavalry. His attaining his legendary status as a general presupposed a solid, well-established position within the Prussian and later the German Army, in order to convince the society and the military elite of his country of his fitness for belonging to the latter. Therefore, his natural riding skills and appeal as a warrior and man were exactly the tools he needed to prompt the officer corps to accept him as one of their own.

It seems to be justified to claim that he was outstandingly successful in this regard, and that his reputation as a vigilant horseman and cavalry officer became an inalienable part of his legend. Most of the official biographies published in his life are abundant with the descriptions of accomplishments related to horses, from him having been put on a horse naked in his early childhood to the unifying ceremony of the 1st and 2nd Life Hussar Regiments into the newly established Life Hussar Brigade under the command of Mackensen himself. During the latter, an anecdote recounts how the horse of the newly appointed commander became frightened by its owner having to shout because of a strong wind, and how the general regained control over it with no avail and even saluted with his sword towards the Kaiser and the mayor of a nearby town.³⁴

However, out of his personal exploits as a cavalryman prior to 1914, the most important one is probably the action carried out in Orléans, an event which gained him the attention of his superiors, including Prince Friedrich Karl of Prussia.

"He, however, cried towards them with the usual boldness of the hussars: 'Vive la Prusse!', drawing the attention of several enemy officers. But the hussars countered their pursuers, with a daring charge and not even a strong detachment of enemy hussars, accompanied by armed peasants, was able to stop them. (...) 'You have set an outstanding example for your comrades, of which both you and they can be justly proud,' stated Prince Albert to the hussars after their commander had delivered his report (...)

³³ Wilhelm II, *Ereignisse und Gestalten. 1878–1918*. (Berlin: R. R. Kohler Verlag, 1922), 29–30.

³⁴ Karsten Brandt, *Mackensen; Leben, Wesen und Wirken des deutschen Feldherrn* (Leipzig: G. Schloessmann, 1915), 7.

Given the occasion, the Prince asked the commander whether he would like to receive the Iron Cross or to be immediately promoted to the rank of lieutenant. The commander wanted the cross, stating that he still had time to become a lieutenant on his own. A few days later the Prince presented him and his four companions the cross, accompanied by the most praiseful words.”³⁵

Mackensen himself never ceased to both rely on and cherish the image of the brave cavalryman and all of the habits popularly attached to it. He attempted to justify his mentioned second marriage by comparing himself to Blücher, having “followed in his footsteps as a courter” by choosing a much younger bride. He furthered this aspect by engaging in both training and leading his subordinates, instructing his soldiers in activities generally associated with the ethos of the cavalry. During his tenure as a lieutenant colonel of the 1st Life Hussar Regiment in Danzig in 1894, he put considerable emphasis on outdoor activities, such as hunting excursions, thus respecting the old European tradition of using hunting as training in horsemanship. Von Schmettow describes the activities of the commander the following way:

“He [Mackensen] wished to raise no lily-livered fellows, but hussars, witty, nimble, resourceful horsemen who always handle with slyness and boldness and bring the right decision with an equal proportion of speed and dare. (...) Practice never ceases to be superior to theory. What example could have been more outstanding for the hussars than that of their commander, who, in all of his positions as the head of their regiment, brigade and division, and later, as their commanding general, through two decades, never missed an opportunity to participate, for whom no pit was ever too deep or wide and no terrain was ever too rough? (...) When he divided the shares at the sound of the hunting horn, did wide-open eyes not meet in the exasperated knowledge of having accomplished something admirable?”³⁶

Neither did Mackensen neglect the importance of sheer audiovisual impressions. In an army where several units, especially those belonging to the Guard, gained a reputation for their colorful, vibrant attire, some of which carried a particular importance to their wearers, the striking effect the appearance of the Saxon officer was able to elicit from the beholder was considerable. Contemporary pieces of written media with presumably propagandistic intentions did not miss the opportunity to quote the description the renown Bavarian writer Ludwig Ganghofer provided on the Field Marshal in 1916:

“The friendly flash in his eyes, the quick spring in his step, his strong handshake, his warm words and his laughter—all prompt one to give his soul for him. One may only observe the slim, firm soldier stature with joy.

³⁵ Ibid., 20.

³⁶ August von Mackensen, “2.11.1908.” in *Zwischen Kaiser und “Führer.” Generalfeldmarschall August von Mackensen. Eine politische Biographie*, ed. Theo Schwarzmüller (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), 142; Foerster, *Mackensen*, 21–22.

Even though he carried several decades upon his shoulders, his body has retained a remarkably elastic mobility and an almost youthful posture. And the captivating face with strong features, the robust, white moustache and the sharp falcon glance under the graying brows!”³⁷

This focus on appearance extended to clothing as well. When appointed as the commander of the newly formed Life Hussar Brigade, he, as an entirely unique case in the history of the Prussian and German armies, was allowed to continue wearing the iconic jet-black uniform of the hussars, an attire that was to become his most distinctive identifying mark in public until his death. Even earlier, an attachment to the outfit evoked a feeling of empathy in him towards an officer of the 2nd Life Hussar regiment who was promoted to the rank of a general. “For a man who has worn the Attila for 38 years, bidding farewell to it is a severe business.” Accordingly, Mackensen did not become known for his lenience regarding the clothing habits of his men either. Frowning upon soldiers who appeared in public without their uniform on and with their heads uncovered was a habit he maintained up to his years as a field marshal.³⁸

Any implication that the charisma of Mackensen and his tireless efforts to maintain it were universally deemed to be positive would be wrong. Indeed, the notion that he sacrificed effective leadership at the altar of externals during the dire period of the First World War did earn him the disdain of several of his colleagues, among them, that of his chief of staff during the Gorlice-Tarnów offensive, Hans von Seeckt. Several German officers reprimanded the Last Hussar for behaving akin to a “fairy tale prince”, the affinity of whom for “vanity and appearance” had developed to a grotesque extent. A perhaps less important, but still relevant example is that of Ludwig Mackensen. Ever the pragmatist, he never seemed to have been enamored by the exploits of his son, preferring to concentrate on practical matters. A piece of correspondence shows him concerned about the newest acquisition of August, a horse named Gaul, which had injured a cuirassier officer before.³⁹

This, however, is not necessarily a contradiction to the theory of Weber, who himself attempted to warn his contemporaries of the dangers of unchecked charisma, by the example of figures as notable as Bismarck or Wilhelm II. The former was accused of trying to cement his own position with scheming of such intensity that he had ultimately rendered the creation of a strong legislature free of the influence of a political mastermind with his abilities impossible. This, according to Weber, led to the creation of a bureaucratic system which had stunted the organic growth of German parliamentarism for decades. The Kaiser was, in turn, criticized for his reckless behavior shown by his dispatching the Kruger telegram in 1896, after the botched Jameson Raid. Weber interpreted the action of the monarch as detrimental to the foreign policy goals of the *Kaiserreich*, ruining prospects for cooperation with the British

³⁷ Brandt, *Mackensen*, 45.

³⁸ BA-MA N39/483, 1876–1889; Schwarzmüller, *Zwischen Kaiser und Führer*.

³⁹ Funck, “Feudales,” 43; BA-MA N39/1, 1872–1889.

Empire in Africa and the Middle East, while also lacking effective means to implement the suggested support for the Boer Republics.⁴⁰

Furthermore, there appears to be evidence of Seeckt having, at least in writings intended for the public, supported the charismatic image of his former commander in his writings published after the war.

“The fundament of human greatness is to be sought not in intellect or knowledge, but in character. From it stems both the ken and the deed. It is the decisive element which determines both soldier and commander. Exactly as the art of war is no arcane science, but the result of logical thinking, so is generalship the sum of human characteristics. Hereby I will try to create a brief outline of the image of the commander to exhibit the timeless nature of his figure. First and foremost, his willpower, his sheer resolve for victory which rues idleness more than a poor method of choice. (...) The selflessness striving not for fame, but for fulfilling his duties. Moderation in success and tenacity in misfortune.”⁴¹

Calls for a careful treatment of such statements from a senior officer of the German Army during the Weimar Republic might seem justified at first. Former comrades portraying one another as exemplary generals and their relationship as amicable in public writings, even if the latter had at least soured due to their experiences in the war was certainly not unheard of, the case of Hindenburg and Ludendorff being the prime example.⁴² Nevertheless, the very fact that Seeckt, still a respected soldier and for a while the Chief of Staff of the *Reichsheer*, was still unable to afford to shatter the image of Mackensen in the eye of the average German citizen is indicative of the weight of both the myth of the Last Hussar himself and the role of personal charisma in it.

In conclusion, Mackensen not only had the gracious fortune of possessing certain qualities expected from a Prussian and Imperial German cavalry officer, namely, an aptitude and passion for personal combat, horse riding and physical exercise, but he also had the sufficient astuteness to recognize their value in demonstrating his charisma. He did so for a good reason, since this was quite probably the most potent tool at his disposal in the struggle for winning the sympathy of a group which initially viewed him as a self-seeking outsider. His calculations seemed to have attained the desired outcome, considering his rapid advancement within the military. This corresponds to the Weberian theory of charisma to a considerable degree.

The success of Mackensen as a charismatic military officer is certainly not wholly comparable with that of the unruly *condottieri* of early modern Europe Weber based the military aspect of his theory on. Neither did he possess a retinue (*Gefolgschaft*) so typical not only of the self-made demagogue or mercenary captain of charismatic rule, but also of the monarchs or chieftains

⁴⁰ Max Weber, *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland* (München: Duncker u. Humblot, 1918), 1–13, 84–85.

⁴¹ Foerster, *Mackensen*, 140–141.

⁴² von Hindenburg, *Aus meinem Leben*, 77–78; Erich Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen, 1914–1918*. (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1920), 9–10; Schwarzmüller, *Zwischen Kaiser und Führer*, 133.

of traditional authority. Even if he had had the intention to act like them, his command and influence were strongly curtailed by the mentioned modern state administration of Germany in general and that of the German army in particular. Nevertheless, the sheer appeal of his personality and deeds and his ability to exert significant influence on his environment using these demonstrate a large degree of overlap with the Weberian concept of using charisma to pave one's way. It seems justified to claim that the Mackensen myth would not have come to existence without its namesake relying on personal allure to establish his position.

However, the zenith of the career of Mackensen, namely, the First World War, even in battles fought by industrially less developed adversaries, featured both weapons of destructive power and a level of organization of armed forces previously unheard of. In this environment, the hussar officer may have been forced to confront the last Weberian category of rule: legal authority.

The General. The Mackensen myth and legal authority

The final category of ruling, according to Weber, is that of legal authority. As the only pure form of leadership associated with the modern era, it is characterized by a body of officials with professional and/or special training and education, the respect of rules deemed to be binding due to their supposed rationality and usefulness for the community and their rational founding. By sharp contrast to the other categories, the personnel filling the administrative bodies of states can be no longer rewarded with control over certain regions of the country limited only by the influence of their superiors. They receive specifically set sums of money as a regular form of payment and are expected to respect the boundaries of their specifications and not to interfere with the work of others unless explicitly asked to do so.⁴³

Ironically enough, as mentioned above, the career of Mackensen reached its high point during the First World War, the first conflict to widely force humanity to face the destructive power of large-scale industrial warfare. Even though he did grow up in the period during which the industrial revolution culminated, he was both unprepared for the staggering casualties inherent to 20th-century mass conflicts, and, despite his remarkable military expertise, was outside of his milieu when it came to fighting this novel type of war. This, despite his seemingly flawless record as a commander, is the exact point in his career which unveils the Mackensen myth as a set of claims based on a large portion of truth, yet at the same time ridden with exaggerations and distortions.

Weber himself highlights modern militaries as one of the prime examples of professionalization and rationalization of groups, with a noticeable, albeit not always linear, development of discipline from the age of Spartan hoplites and eastern militaries through medieval knights and mercenary captains to the creation of regular armies under Wallenstein, Cromwell, Friedrich the Great, Maria Theresa and Napoleon.⁴⁴ Indeed, the view that the Prussian

⁴³ Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 126–130.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 647–648.

and German General Staff was the pinnacle of military organization and planning was predominant in Western literature for a substantial portion of the 20th century.

The circumstances leading to the establishment of the institution in 1806, brought about by the severe defeats of the hitherto supposedly undefeated Prussian Army at the hand of France in the battles of Jena and Auerstedt themselves bear testimony to the shift occurring within both the Prussian Army and society. Although the high point of industrialization and the inherent social changes were still relatively far, Friedrich Wilhelm III and his generals came to the conclusion that the weakness of their forces lies in its outdated approach to control and leadership. The fame of the Prussian Army originated from the era of the victorious wars of Friedrich the Great. However, even the battles won by the king were products of his sheer tenacity and awe-inspiring presence rather than any kind of innate military superiority of the northern German state. Reformers, especially the Minister of War and Chief of General Staff Gerhard von Scharnhorst seemed to have understood that what could be called a rather fitting example of the Weberian concept of charisma had inhibited the development of their forces. Therefore, he and his colleagues sought to curb the harmful effects of both tradition and charisma by placing a great emphasis on the trend of meritocracy elicited by the principles of the French Revolution. Thus, they have made the first steps towards the well-known professionalization of their army.⁴⁵

The process, slowly but steadily, did bring results. Even though the activities of the first generation of its chiefs, such as, Karl von Grolman, Karl von Müffling or Karl von Reyher, also made valuable contributions to the development of the General Staff, the quintessential change was brought about by Helmuth von Moltke the Elder. During his tenure from 1857 to 1888 as the Chief of the Prussian, then the German General Staff, he transformed the department into the almighty machine of meticulous planning and calculation it is considered to have been today. He can be credited with creating a separate department for military science, specializing in cartography, topography, statistics and military history, reforming professional military education and wargaming.⁴⁶

The relevance of the General Staff regarding the concept of legal authority is further increased by the fact that Moltke, although he dedicated his entire life to military service, never held any commanding position in any conflict prior to becoming Chief. His expertise lay in organizing and studying, which made him a prime example of the educated, precise, expert with steadfast commitment to the service of his society. In addition, he was keen on maintaining the complete neutrality and apolitical nature of the institution, even at the cost of a lifelong conflict with Bismarck.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Russell Frank Weigley, *The Age of Battles. The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 459–462.

⁴⁶ Dierk, *Preussische Heeresreformen*, 499–520; Gerhard Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare. Operational Thinking from Moltke the Elder to Heusinger* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 39.

⁴⁷ Gross, *The Myth*, 31–32; Michael Epkenhans, *Der Deutsch–Französische Krieg 1870/1871* (Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 2020), 56–57, 142–145.

Accordingly, by the First World War, organization and professionalism became synonymous with and expected of the German Imperial Army in general and the General Staff in particular. Senior members of the latter accentuated the importance of the orderliness, transparency and safety the organization of the armed forces and the use of modern technology provided for them and were not reluctant to note the lack thereof. Hindenburg notes that Enver Pasha, the Minister of War and Chief of the General staff of the Ottoman Empire, although “demonstrated an extraordinarily broad and deep understanding of the essence of conducting this war”, also “lacked a thorough military, or, I would say, general staff training. (...) According to my impression, it was as if all the Easterners would suffer from a natural deficiency in this regard. The Turkish Army possessed only a few officers capable of controlling the technical, internal tasks necessary for implementing properly planned operations.”⁴⁸ Ludendorff was also quick to absolve the *Oberste Heerleistung*, the institution in charge of leading the German war effort, of all responsibility for the defeat in 1918, denouncing both other organs of state administration, such as the Ministries of War and Foreign Affairs, and German society in general for being unable and unwilling to provide the military leadership the needed resources and trust, and incapable of resisting enemy propaganda.⁴⁹

The Weberian concept of strong rationalization essential to the formation of legal authority emphasizes technological development, something the Prussian Army was among the first to take advantage of. It immediately sought to exploit the revolution of transportation brought about by the growth of railways by creating a department specifically designed for gathering data to make an efficient mobilization centered around the use of trains possible. A fair testament of the resulting logistical capabilities is the rapid deployment of more than half a million soldiers, approximately 160,000 horses, and more than 1400 guns in 1870 at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War. The importance of the telegraph, although less prominent due to the lack of trained technical personnel, also increased. The ignition-pin rifles designed by Anton Dreyse may have been outperformed by the French Chassepot-guns, primarily when it came to range, but the immense development of Prussian artillery technology gave the North German country a tremendous advantage over its western neighbor during their war.⁵⁰

An unprecedented speed of industrialization and the persistent prominence of the army in Germany between 1871 and 1914 opened the door to the rapid introduction of several new devices into the arsenal of the German Empire. Certain conservative voices within the General Staff at times indeed can be rightfully accused of technophobia, such as Lieutenant Colonel and military theorist Hermann Giehrl, who claimed that the extensive use of modern communication methods would reduce the commander to a mere bureaucrat or a technocrat, thus jeopardizing the cohesion and efficacy of the officer corps overall. Another just criticism concerning the approach of the German

⁴⁸ von Hindenburg, *Aus meinem Leben*, 164–165.

⁴⁹ Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen*, 1–11, 285–318.

⁵⁰ Dierk, *Preussische Heeresreformen*, 124–135.

Army to technology was its insufficient use of railways during its campaign in France, leading to the troops having to travel on foot, while their French adversary was able to make good use of its railways, thus avoiding encirclement. It would be nevertheless unreasonable to claim that Germany did not utilize for their age advanced pieces of equipment, such as artillery or machine-guns, with formidable efficiency. Not only did they develop their artillery technology further (such as the infamous Big Bertha), but on the Western Front, they also developed the innovative technique of using stormtroopers to take fortified positions using modern technology.⁵¹

This plethora of rapid and radical changes strongly contradicted the spirit of pure tradition and charisma Mackensen had grown up in. Therefore, one might expect his attitude to the new age and its developments to be mostly hostile and dismissive. Reality, however, appears to be more complex.

His very admission to the General Staff without having attended the Military Academy in 1882 was an anomaly in the history of Prussia and was in sharp contradiction to the spirit of regulation and rule dominating the “brain” of the Imperial Army. On the other hand, it was probably exactly his affinity for history and ability to analyze the operations and mechanisms of the military at a higher level that ultimately ensured his place in the prestigious institution. His manuscript on the history of the 2nd Life Hussar Regiment, published in 1877, earned him the professional acclaim of then-Minister of War, Julius von Verdy du Vernois. Neither did Mackensen find working in the General Staff something against his wishes or contradictory to his enthusiasm for fighting on the battlefield. Although he did not enjoy staff duty as much as serving in the field, the officer, by his own admission, found being part of the administrative process aiding the smooth working of the army useful.

“Following the conclusion of the autumn wargaming in 1886, I was placed to the 9th Dragoon Regiment as a cavalry captain and squadron chief. I was in joy being able to serve on the front again after seven years of staff service. (...) Unfortunately, my time as a squadron chief lasted for merely a year and I was placed back to the General Staff (...) as a Major (...) to the 4th Division. The General Staff tours led by Colonel Kuhlmann and Lieutenant Colonel von Massow in the area of the II. Corps were instructive and provided me the opportunity to hone my abilities of bringing autonomous decisions and leading younger General Staff officers and candidates in a professional fashion.”⁵²

Mackensen seemed to be particularly grateful for the time he spent as an adjutant to both von Moltke and von Schlieffen: “The German General Staff owes an unpayable debt to Graf Schlieffen for his profound and long-lasting influence, which he exerted through theoretic tasks, wargames, General Staff tours, maneuver plans, the witty, well-considered discussion of these, as well as through his seminal writings on our tactical and operative thinking.” The degree to which Mackensen valued the work assigned to him as the adjutant

⁵¹ Gross, *The Myth*, 36–38, 88, 127.

⁵² Funck, “Feudales,” 40; Foerster, *Mackensen*, 18–19.

of the Chief of the General Staff can be illustrated well by an amusing occasion connected to a visit by Oskar II of Sweden in August 1881. Moltke tasked Mackensen with preparing him a short outline of the reforms undertaken by the Swedish Army by 6 a.m., 5 August. Mackensen delivered the information his superior needed at the exact time instructed, which resulted in him encountering Moltke in a nightgown and without a wig on. Unorthodox as the way of handing over the required intelligence may have been, the Chief not having been troubled by it and Mackensen mentioning it explicitly signifies both the superiority of accurate and precise work over formalities and the importance the later field marshal attributed to it.⁵³

This, however, is no indication that the most important pillar of the Mackensen myth, the achievements of the Last Hussar in Poland, Serbia and Romania, is as solid as many in the Second Reich and in interwar Germany believed or wished others to believe. Judging by the number of victorious battles solely, he was undoubtedly one of the most successful commanders of the German Army during the First World War. Whether or not this triumph can be attributed to exclusively or even mostly to his supposed military genius or to the coincidence of several other factors is a question which can be answered only by examining the attitude of Mackensen to the circumstances and applications of practices and systems required by the conflict.

Certain elements of leading modern armies Mackensen had no significant problems with adjusting to. While leading the German 9th Army during the Battle of Łódź in November 1914, he noted how “peculiar” it felt for him to be sitting at a table while his troops were fighting. “The troops report to us through telephone and radio and they receive orders in the same way.”⁵⁴ Not much later, he describes the situation as the following: “My troops are fighting. I follow them on the map. (...) My General Staff officers provide me excellent assistance. Our cooperation leaves nothing to be desired.”⁵⁵

However, the general ultimately did not stand the greatest test of the World War, namely its tendency to degenerate into trench warfare and thus to render the fast, decisive attacks desired and envisioned not only by Mackensen but by several other prominent members of the German military leadership, such as Schlieffen himself, impossible. While this phenomenon plagued the Eastern and Balkan fronts much less frequently than their Western counterpart, it nevertheless affected the cavalry officer used to and expecting swift, bold maneuvers severely. At the very beginning of the Łódź operation, he praised the plan of Hindenburg and Ludendorff about relieving the northern wing of the Austro-Hungarian forces and initiating a daring offensive deep into Russian Poland.⁵⁶

However, the war offered him numerous sobering experiences. It was him who, having received the order to retreat to avoid being encircled, had to withdraw to a room alone to cope with what might be described as a pan-

⁵³ Foerster, *Mackensen*, 17, 19.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 96.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 88.

ic attack.⁵⁷ The high level of stress he had to endure during these days are also highlighted in his correspondence with his wife: “The wrath of the public opinion befalls the general who shows weakness. I feel alarmed. (...) I often find myself shaking. I cannot get rid of the feeling of uneasiness. I have to realize that leading troops against a superior enemy is, first and foremost, a business of nerves.”⁵⁸ Mackensen had another opportunity to face the fickle nature of war luck and the unpredictability of events in a modern conflict, even if indirectly, when he visited the former Chief of the General Staff, Helmut von Moltke the Younger.

“I found the loyal man in the General Staff building on Königsplatz in the same room in which I had stood in front of his uncle and then, in front of von Schlieffen. (...) I remembered standing among the adjutants when our Emperor and King handed him over the cabinet order containing his appointment as Chief of the General Staff (...). After the unfortunate turn of events at the Marne, he had become a broken man. (...) A frontal breakthrough of modern defensive positions he considers impossible due to the firepower of contemporary weapons. (...) In hindsight I rue the task of having had to be open to the impressions made by this man utterly broken in his soul. Will I be doomed to a similar fate one day?”

Probably fortunately for his career, his superiors never asked for his aggressive tactics on the Western Front, a decision the commander himself did not regret.⁵⁹

The decline of fast, decisive offensive warfare was in harmony with the further diminishing of the cavalry as an important military instrument. True enough, its reputation never went as low as on the western theater of the war, from which the most detailed account Ernst Jünger gives about cavalry is the case of a captain (*Rittmeister*) who had himself called the king of Q (a settlement) “à la Shakespeare” and had everyone flogged who disagreed with him.⁶⁰ Mackensen himself was, in fact, praised for demonstrating a remarkable mobility with frequently changing his headquarters during the Battle of the Masurian Lakes, refuting fears that such sudden movements might inhibit effective staff work. Later, in November 1914, Hindenburg intended to use the German cavalry for disruptive actions on enemy territory against Russian infrastructure and supply lines.

But not even Mackensen attempted to deny that the days of mounted fighting were counted. He may have been proud that horse units also “found a field of activity, at which they were able to prove themselves useful on their own right” but also admitted in February 1915 that although German losses were “not heavy,” he mourns particularly “(...) every single infantryman ren-

⁵⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁸ August von Mackensen, “7.11.1915,” in *Zwischen Kaiser und “Führer.” Generalfeldmarschall August von Mackensen. Eine politische Biographie*, ed. Theo Schwarzmüller (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), 135.

⁵⁹ Foerster, *Mackensen*, 136, 232–234; Funck, “Feudales,” 42; Schwarzmüller, *Zwischen Kaiser und Führer*, 142.

⁶⁰ Ernst Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1922), 34.

dered incapable of fighting. The bodies of the best of them cover the battlefield in already substantial numbers.”⁶¹ Both he himself and writings about his career quite often emphasized the importance of heavy artillery and infantry at the beginning of the Gorlice-Tarnów offensive and during his offensive against Serbia, something which happened much less frequently with cavalry. All three of the campaigns conducted by Mackensen were ultimately decided by superior military technology, especially heavy artillery, something the less industrialized nations of Eastern and Southern Europe had no answer to. Also, and perhaps indicative of this, is the fact that even the cavalry units mentioned in these sources were probably by and large deployed dismounted when it came to actual combat.⁶²

In conclusion, it is the third Weberian category of authority which ultimately uncovers the true nature of the Mackensen myth. The general was definitely not alone in being taken by surprise by the devastation modern warfare was capable of inflicting on human beings. Claiming that an entire generation of military leaders were baffled over the nature and casualties of the Great War may not be an exaggeration. This destruction, however, was the product of the era the third form of rule began to thrive in and likely the one whose beginning it also facilitated. Mackensen, while not necessarily lacking the abilities needed from a late 19th-century commander, adhered to a style of war made obsolete by the mass application of new military technologies more so than many of his unprepared peers. And while the latter, especially those fighting on the Western Front, were forced to adapt and utilize new methods, Mackensen ultimately had to rely on German technical superiority, mostly regarding heavy artillery, against his less industrialized foes to maintain the efficacy of his aggressive way of waging war. Correspondingly, his role in all the important operations was similar to that of a relatively well-trained, but uncreative craftsman creating a product meeting all the requirements of its function but finally finding more customers due to the subpar quality of its competitors.

Conclusion

The process of someone attaining the status of a symbol or a myth is always a complex phenomenon, the analysis of which might happen in several different ways. Since it is an occurrence which, by nature, affects a large number of people, examining it from a sociological perspective is indispensable. The case of August von Mackensen demonstrates well that microhistory is suitable for investigating the synthesis of sociology and history in the sense of analyzing the prerequisites needed for the person in question to gain such a reputation and how the process affects the mythicized individual, as well as the society he lives in. Mackensen certainly possessed a wide variety of traits appreciated in Prussia and the German Empire, especially by the military. However, examining these with qualitative methods using the theory of authority by Max We-

⁶¹ Foerster, *Mackensen*, 66, 113, 126.

⁶² Funck, “Feudales,” 43; Gross, *The Myth*, 123, 126.

ber, the research reveals that Mackensen was much more talented and skilled at rising high in the imperial hierarchy as a soldier and an officer in peacetime than winning the battles he became the most famous for.

The conclusion to be drawn may lie in the susceptibility of the German population to the charm of the military, the group incorporating, as well as embodying the first two Weberian categories, namely, that of the traditional and charismatic authority. Even though this may seem paradoxical in a country with a tremendous economic power produced by a prosperous middle class, it sheds light on the influence deep-rooted tradition might have on any society, especially in those where the military became a symbol of national success and safety over the course of centuries.

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Legenda Posljednjeg husara. Mit Augusta von Mackensena u kontekstu Weberove kategorizacije političke vlasti

Sažetak:

Analizom života i karijere Augusta von Mackensena u kontekstu teorije autoriteta Maxa Webera pokušat ćemo ponuditi odgovore na pitanja sudara tradicije, karizme i modernosti na primjeru njemačke carske vojske, odnosno percepcije njemačkog društva općenito. Mackensen nije bio samo jedan od najuspješnijih vojnih zapovjednika u Prvom svjetskom ratu, nego i časnik koji je svjedočio razvoju novih tehnologija uklopljenih u sve vojske svijeta. Nadalje, kao član njemačkog Generalštaba i zapovjednik velikih vojnih jedinica, imao je unikatnu priliku svjedočiti utjecaju društvenih promjena kraja 19. stoljeća i Velikog rata na običaje i konvencije njemačke carske vojske. Upravo ovo potonje osvještava i ulogu konjice kao samostalne vojne jedinice u Kaiserovoj vojsci, jer je sam Mackensen započeo svoju karijeru kao konjanik i cijeli živo ostao privržen ovom rodu vojske. Analiza karijere takozvanog Posljednjeg husara, koristeći Weberovu kategoriju autoriteta, otkriva da unatoč Mackensenovoj odanosti tradicionalnim principima i vrijednostima njemačkih vojnih elita, pogotovo konjice, i unatoč činjenici da je stekao određenu reputaciju zbog svoje karizme tijekom godina ratovanja, nijedno od Mackensenovih velikih postignuća ne bi bilo ostvarivo bez alata i metoda industrijskog ratovanja.

Ključne riječi: August von Mackensen, njemačka carska vojska, Max Weber, Prvi svjetski rat, konjica

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