

Editorial--

Some Aspects Of the German Mentality Of Today

To attempt to write about such an abstraction as 'the German mind' would be to commit a fallacy which has long since been exploded. It does occur, however, that in lands in which the processes of social change operate rapidly and perforce, certain strains of thought appear with such a distinctive quality and regularity that they may be discerned and analyzed. One must, of course, live closely and long with a people to understand properly their thoughts, their hopes, and their fears. This the writer has not done. He has had opportunity, however, to contact a fair number of representative elements in that land, and in this editorial aims to set down certain habits of German thought which seem to recur with a degree of regularity. He warns himself, at the same time, that the types of persons with whom he was brought in contact, clergymen, writers, educators, lawyers, physicians, and the like, probably represent the more idealistic and forward-looking elements of the population. Hence, the qualities of thought set forth will reflect a level of thought somewhat above the average in the people.

The element which comes before the visitor most easily, and often most prominently, is that of fear and insecurity. This is understandable when one bears in mind that the propaganda machine of Nazi times made its primary appeal to the latent fears of the German people—their fear of being surrounded and contained, their fear of economic strangulation, and their fear of Slavic invasion, as well as the more subtle fears that underlay the general inferiority complex of the nation. For one must remember that Germany, during the period in which other European nations

were carving out colonial empires, was engaged with her internal problem of unification. By the time she was ready to expand colonially, the best areas were taken. Hence the German people, seeing neighboring nations with relatively productive colonies, and themselves having none, have been something like the spinster who looks in the mirror and wonders "what the other girls have that she does not have."

These factors created a condition to which the propaganda machine could—and did—appeal. Having utilized fear as an incentive to almost unbelievable expenditure of energy by the nation (from 1933 to 1945) the régime left upon its collapse, not only a fear-complex, but a set of physical circumstances which warranted the existence of *real* fears. The German people are beginning to realize the enormity of the crimes committed by their armies of occupation in France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Norway and Denmark. It is natural that they fear reprisals from their western neighbors. Even more realistically do they fear the consequences of a push from the East. Coupled with these fears is the fear that the United States and Britain might pull their forces out of Germany. Thoughtful Germans are alert to any signs that the English-speaking peoples are in Germany to stay.

The fear of the people is understandable, also, when one realizes that for the first time in generations a war has been fought on German soil. To France and Belgium this is no new experience. Now Germans are experiencing the bitterness of such an experience, and have opportunity to experience the aftermath of fear which it brings. This last factor is aggravated by

the fact that their land is the unhappy pawn in the tug-of-war between East and West. It is difficult to put onto paper the apprehension which hangs over the German people like a pall. Fear becomes particularly morbid when it grows out of a feeling of guilt. In this connection it is psychologically significant that nearly all of the intellectuals are anxious to discuss the problem of guilt—and more anxious still to discover whether the American people hate their people.

A second element which constantly asserts itself is that of disillusionment. Having lived under circumstances in which the most exaggerated reliance was placed upon authority, the German people are now recovering from a state of shock. All of the authorities in which they rested their beliefs and hopes have been hopelessly discredited. The over-trust in the word which issued from the Nazi High Command—a High Command upon the mind and the soul—brings a corresponding depth of despair when confidence in the total leadership is destroyed. As a group of young professional women said to the wife of the writer: "We are not so greatly shaken by the destruction of our homes, our churches, our factories, our universities, and our means of livelihood. We could endure that. But the thing which leaves us prostrate is that we have lost confidence in everybody and everything."

There is, of course, a healthy type of questioning of authority; Germans have gone far beyond the point of health in this respect. Having lived by mandates and 'Verboten' signs, they find it difficult to believe that the structure which seemed so powerful—so perfect—lies in ruins. Moreover, nearly all of those whom they now feel ought to have resisted the régime to the death—and this is easier to enjoin than to practice!—compromised at some points. Therefore, many ask, Is there anyone or anything we can trust?

It is unwise to hazard any prediction at this point. The questions arise: will this disillusionment in an absolute system of government pave the way for the acceptance of a democratic type of life? Or will

it pave the way for the rise, under duress, of some substitute authority?; Will the collapse of human authority pave the way for a new acceptance of Divine authority?; Or will it prepare a fertile field for a religious system of institutional authority? In short, will the disillusionment lead to a healthy quest for a way of life which gives place to God and "to Caesar", or will it lead to a destructive cynicism?

A third and less favorable factor in the mind of today's Germany is the tendency to evade responsibility. This is doubtless rooted in the patriarchal and authoritarian structure of German family life. The father was the leader of the house; his *fiat* was law, and the wife and children obeyed. He in turn always acted under orders from higher up, and so on, to the top of the power-pyramid. Thus, the radical application of the *Führer-prinzip* under Hitler was but the extension upon a national basis of something long practiced on a smaller scale. In consequence, while the generality of Germans are today shocked—and sometimes only partly credulous—at the reports of atrocities of the late régime, most of them cannot see any direct connection between these and the individual German. "I was acting under orders" is still a retreat for many.

It should be noted that the educational system of Germany is in no small degree responsible for this condition. The authoritarian structure of the national life was reflected in the schools and universities. The professor conceived of himself, and expected to be conceived as being, above the pupil. The lecture was the basis of education. Theoretical learning was passed on to the pupil, without much regard for moral and spiritual values. Objectivity and detachment came to be prized; independent thinking and discussion upon the part of the student was not encouraged. In consequence, learning was neither humanized nor related to life. Such education is better calculated to train followers than men capable of giving shape to a humane society.

One would be unfair in failing to note that in the midst of the situation just described there are those who have risen

above the trend of the authoritarian educational system, and who feel keenly their own responsibility for Germany's debacle. The writer has met a significant number of persons who confessed their personal culpability for the sins of the nation, and who freely attached blame both upon themselves and upon the institutions for the shaping of whose policies they were directly responsible. Some recognize humbly that their present plight is a judgment of God upon them, and meet this situation with a spirit which would have gladdened the hearts of the biblical prophets. But in general, there is all too much of shifting responsibility to the one issuing orders from above, until all blame would seem to rest on men now dead. One feels that training in loyalty and obedience have deprived large sectors of the German population of real maturity.

The fourth factor in the contemporary German mentality (and we move onto more hopeful ground here) is a deep thirst for information. The collapse of the propaganda ministry left the people stunned; the dire predictions of barbaric treatment from the Western powers if Germany should surrender did not, of course, prove to be true. Indeed, the people were amazed at the general kindness and orderliness of the British and American armies. Moreover, the manner in which conqueror initiated steps to feed the conquered made a profound counterbalancing mark upon the thought of the people. The rector of one of the universities observed in the presence of the writer that the Anglo-American treatment of Germany in this respect is without parallel in history. And although the occupation has not been without its mistakes, it has in general commanded the respect of great sectors of the German people.

Now that the initial shock is passing, the nation is slowly recovering its equilibrium and people are asking questions—questions of every conceivable sort. Some of them are very trenchant questions—questions to which some of us would like an answer, such as “Why were the American armies compelled to idle away their time for days

in Saxony, while the Russian armies were permitted to become the liberators of Berlin, Prague, and Vienna?” Some questions are doubtless asked with a “chip on the shoulder”—this occurs particularly in the case of the displaced persons who have nothing to lose, and whose tragic experiences make defensive and even hostile attitudes understandable. But in general, the questions grow out of a sincere desire to get at the truth—this after a dozen years of regimented thought and pipe-line education.

Among the stable elements, there is a profound desire to understand the Western nations, to correct the misinformation which was hurled at them day after day by the propaganda machine. There is an almost pathetic desire for periodicals and books which speak of life in the democratic countries. In this connection, one must report with regret that our best publications often fail to reach Germany, while translations of our cheaper novels and copies of our more superficial magazines somehow filter through. In consequence, the people still look upon America as a bottomless well of financial resources, a nation which madly chases only material values, and which has little cultural coherence. It is high time that some other consideration besides revenue should dictate the type of publication material from our land which reaches German hands.

But there is a wholesome eagerness to know which augurs well for the future. A people of surprising mental energy, and of sufficient elasticity to recover from the barbarous assault which the Nazis made upon the mind, awaits information along all lines. And here, it seems to the writer, is an opportunity for evangelical Christianity to make itself heard once again.

Another factor which is discernible in the mind of the people is a new appreciation for freedom. One does not, of course, form such a judgment upon the basis of the attempt of a few (and this class is a distinct minority) to kowtow to the victor for the sake of possible personal advantage. There are, of course, cynical persons who feel that the conduct of the German

people as a whole during the past fifteen years has been such as to render any confidence in their profession of love for freedom completely naïve. The writer does not share this cynicism. It is true that multitudes there have been willing to exchange freedom for economic and social security. We are not too certain that multitudes in our land might react in the same way under similar circumstances.

Those who are next to the German situation realize, of course, that the term 'democracy' is not nearly so well understood there as in America. The experiences of the man in the street during the Weimar Republic were such as to produce almost inevitably mental association of democracy with such tragedies as inflation and hunger. Then, too, the *new* definition of democracy by the Soviet Union, in terms of 'economic' rather than political democracy is much easier for us at this distance to discern as a subversion of all that has been built up in the way of democratic procedure, than it is for the German, with his limited sources of information, and with his mental background already colored by one unfortunate democratic experience.

Yet in spite of all these factors, the substantial elements in Germany are coming to value anew the freedom which even the limited democracy which military occupation permits. While walking amid the ruins with significant personages, the writer frequently heard the observation that most Germans would prefer the present measure of freedom which they enjoy, with the devastation, to the situation in Nazi times. One man observed that, except for the acute shortages of food and clothing, Germany was better off now than for a century. This does not mean that there has been a sudden and complete revival of appreciation for democracy in the land. Even the most optimistic could not expect this. But it does mean that the bitter experiences of the past fifteen years have taught a lesson which will not be soon forgotten; and that the discipline of the process has been accepted with a surprising and commendable degree of intelligent insight.

The final element to which attention should be drawn is for our purposes the most significant, namely, the evident spiritual hunger of the people. Some will feel that spiritual hunger is an intangible, something which cannot be properly discerned, to say nothing of being adequately assessed. Nevertheless, there are certain indices by which spiritual moods may be traced. It is the conviction of this writer that the collapse of the highly integrated and completely technologized civilization erected by the National Socialists has shattered rather completely the confidence of the people in the adequacy of any merely material culture. Indeed, there is strong evidence that the better elements of the population were never completely fooled with respect to what was taking place from 1933 onward.

But the disintegration has not left a vacuum; the German people have a heritage, coming from the Reformation, of attachment to spiritual values. This heritage is being rediscovered by significant elements in Germany. Pastors recognize this time of material devastation as an hour of supreme opportunity for the aggressive preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Christ. Men who a dozen years ago were engaged with the dry subtleties of so-called scholarship are today seeking in the Bible the meaning of life's basic problems. A few American theologians would deem this quest an evidence of despair; those of us who feel our view to be more realistic deem it an evidence of a slow attempt to erect again the pillars of civilization—pillars torn down by a scholarship which rejected transcendental authority.

Some will consider it naïve to conclude from filled churches and inquiring pastors that spiritual interest is being awakened anew. Taken by themselves, such indications are insufficient ground for sweeping conclusions. But one cannot discount entirely the fact that in the most devastated cities, in which practically no rebuilding has yet been possible, the faithful from the several parishes have banded together, and with the primitive means at their disposal, have erected or repaired at least one

church, as a symbol of their common faith and expectant hope. Moreover, ministers report that their duties have never been heavier nor more directly involved with the specifically spiritual problems of the people than at present. This is the more remarkable when we remember that the Church discovered how weak she really was when confronted with the claims of the monolithic state.

Some will feel that the quickened interest in Christianity in this hour is but a manifestation of despair, a non-intelligent grasping at a straw in extreme emergency. Some facts seem, however, to warrant the more optimistic interpretation, that there

has been a shake-down of values, and that the more thoughtful elements are beginning to trace the causes of Germany's calamity in terms of her departure from the principles of the Christian Faith. And seeing this, some of them at least give evidence of sincerely asking for the old paths. It is impossible to assess the scope of this quest, for such things do not yield to statistical analysis. Some indications may serve as straws in the wind, and to offer ground for a moderate hope that the elements for a healthy reconstruction may be present within German society.

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