

V A N I T Y F A I R

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The Winter of the German Conscience

*The First of Two Articles
on the Present Condition
of Germany*

By MAXIMILIAN HARDEN



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At the age of 61, Maximilian Harden is still one of the most courageous and powerful journalists of Germany. As the editor of the weekly "Zukunft", every word of which he writes himself, he was a relentless critic of the Kaiser's government before and throughout the war, as he has been since of the Republic. In 1900 he served six months imprisonment for lese majeste

JUST how did the soul of Germany become so blind that its halting and stumbling could lead the country into the wretched state which now prevails? If we look for the germ of this affliction we shall find it in the fact that a legitimate, pious, and locally-minded national feeling was perverted by a conscienceless acquisitive class into a religion of opportunism. A shifting, gaudy lie was officially in power, in the form of the Kaiser, who was continually on show, continually making a grand display of titles—all of which occasioned a new and dangerously degenerate brand of patriotism which was far indeed from the Germany of Kant and Goethe, or even of Bismarck.

The philosopher Kant desired a federation of states in which war would no longer be possible. The poet Goethe wished to raise his nation to a cultural level "where everyone would feel the good fortune or the sorrow of a neighboring people precisely as though it had occurred to his own people." The statesman Bismarck was aiming at three brief wars which were necessary for consolidating people of German blood; it was a moderate, circumspect policy, which was designed to conciliate the defeated opponents, Austria and France, and to strengthen them in every field not vitally essential to German interests. And to the end of his life Bismarck warned his countrymen against the dangerous mentality of the *parvenu* and the *nouveau-riche* who thinks that with

The German Conscience

the metallic jangling of his quickly acquired money he can attract to his counter the owners of all physical and metaphysical goods, and can drown out the voice of his own conscience.

The idea that the German people were aspiring towards war and conquest is basically wrong. But it is true that the belief in the necessity and inevitability of a war had taken root in business circles—who succeeded in creating the illusion that this war, even if it were waged in the offensive, would nevertheless really be a defensive war against the jealous and relentless enemies of Germany's right to exist.

This same acquisitive class did not experience any difficulty in accepting a war morality. If any opinion seemed dangerous, it must be silenced. What is the truth? Pontius Pilate, who proposed this question, was a Roman patriot. And in Germany all the connoisseurs of patriotism during the war considered themselves patriots when they suppressed the facts of every German reverse in the East and the West, from the first retreat from the Marne (which gave the deciding turn to the war) to the bloody failures in the autumn of 1918. The nation must not deviate a hair's breadth from the conviction that a triumphant victory was a certainty. The directors of a corporation would be prosecuted for criminal conduct if they published false information on an enterprise. But a government is credited with the most laudable patriotism if by the publication of false news it leads the citizens of its country (those by whose taxes it exists) into a useless sacrifice of blood, life, and property. When the last bubble broke, when there was not a ray of hope left, the disillusioned business interests of Germany turned angrily upon their deceiver.

Bankruptcy and Revolution

THE result is still known as "Revolution". It did not originate, however, in the passionate yearning for freedom and for a new form of government to be chosen and shaped in accord with the popular will; but in a desire to avoid bankruptcy, or at least to solicit better terms from the creditor. The Emperor and a couple of dozen princes might fall, if their disappearance could procure a bearable peace. Still, as in the case of the surrender of our valiant army, the deposition of our far from heroic potentates was grievously delayed: the armistice—from which all future miseries were to proceed—had been concluded before the announcement of the republic could have any effect on it.

This first disillusionment (a near victory had been considered a certainty) was soon followed by a second. The dethronement of the "hereditary rulers" had not produced the desired results. But business ingenuity cannot be lamed for long. Confession of this error would harm the reputation, the sales, and the credit of the firm. A new business prospectus was rapidly prepared: there was the complaint against the treacherous stab in the back which the army received just as it was on the point of victory, and against the perfidious promises which had lured the nation into the armistice; and the information was spread that Germany was to be annihilated by implacable enemies, and was already suffering in its death agonies . . . while at the same time, and in quite another spirit, there was a great deal of talking about untouched technical and industrial resources which would enable German exporters to deliver high-quality products of all sorts promptly and cheaply.

This awakened far-reaching echoes. The complaints of misery were overlooked, like the wild barks of a little dog. Half the world told themselves that in Germany, which always delivered good products, all commodities could be obtained, since the drop in the

3 The German Conscience

exchange, at ridiculously low prices; the other half foresaw immediately that the *Valuta* dumping would prove more inconvenient and harmful to the industries of other countries than German competition had been before the war. From this split of opinion there naturally arose a twofold desire: first, to lower the value of German money so greatly that the obtaining of all raw material needed for industry and of all foodstuffs brought in from other countries would be limited, with the consequent limitation of underbidding and dumping; and second, to seize this opportunity as the propitious moment for a great clearance sale.

Both wishes were fulfilled. When the German mark had sunk to a thousandth of its gold value, the costs of raw materials, food stuffs, wages, rose necessarily so high that after such expenditures an export of drastic cheapness was no longer possible. And the clearance sale succeeded better than any ever advertised on bill boards. From dynamos and turbine engines to coffee cannisters, from steam ploughs and paper to knitted ware—every usable article was taken from Germany's factories, storehouses, and work shops; and on many a boundary line the sharp observer would note that the returning traveller was wearing three suits of clothes "made in Germany", one on top of the other.

The dollar, which before the war was worth four marks and twenty pfennigs, will buy at the time of writing four thousand marks. The foreigner can still buy cheaply things which are insurmountably dear for the German. But after overcoming their timidity at the price fluctuations, a great portion of Germany also resumed buying. For, after six years of deprivation, the state of need among the general masses of the people had grown enormously. And, also, the fear that things might become worse, the uneasiness over "Austrian eventualities", compelled people to consider any other possession more secure than that of the mark.

Three-fifths of the population subsist on agriculture. The war and the lean years that followed had brought them large profits. The peasant, who does not experience so much and consequently does not forget so easily as the city dweller, preserves in his very bones the memory of the unspeakable misery which used to follow wars in the old days; he remembers the times of starvation and how he was required to sacrifice to the state first his sons, then his carefully guarded live stock, his last horse and ox, all his gold, silver, tin, copper, brass, receiving a piece of iron as substitute for his gold wedding-ring. These recollections had prevented many peasants from following the state's injunctions and handing over all metal that could be minted. While they stored it up in stockings, mattresses, pits, and mouse-holes in preparation for the days of need, the new fact became evident that this world-slaughter (in which at least fifty million men were involved in the rear or at the front) was the first war fought entirely on the basis of "material" and waged with the means and methods of big business, and that it would bring astonishingly large profits to all who could offer for sale raw stuffs, food for animals and humans, or wares of any description.

Transformation of the Village

THIS blood-red splendor continued for some years. The cities were a turmoil and scramble of speculators, barons, profiteers, gougers; in the country districts the bank notes piled up in mountains of paper to such an extent that the peasant could not make room for them in his hut along with Bible, song book, and calendar. During the war, and afterwards, there was more repairing, building,

4 The German Conscience

and remodeling done than ever before in peace times. In what were formerly the poorest of villages one can now see substantial buildings, airy offices and school houses, tastefully renovated churches, and good farming implements almost everywhere, while an ugly, tumble-down dwelling is a rarity.

All these people who grew rich on the war, the blockade, and the change in government became apprehensive lest their marks might sink to the level of Soviet roubles; and in the spring and summer of 1922 (while they still kept their gold, silver, and nickel carefully hoarded) they carried enormous quantities of paper money into the shops of the neighboring towns. Silk, wool, linen, leather, furs, carpets, embroideries, laces, furniture, pianos, gramophones, porcelain, silver tankards, jewelry, automobiles: they considered any investment preferable to paper marks. No price was high enough to frighten them; for they were convinced that a still higher one was bound to follow. And this belief turned out to be right. If a man had put off in August having his shoes resoled for 750 marks, he was forced by the cold in October to pay out 2000 marks for the same work. And in this proportion the prices of all other materials and manufactures went steadily up.

“Nevertheless,” says the foreigner who is travelling through Germany, “all these commodities are finding a purchaser; in fact they are so much in demand that many stores have difficulties in handling the crowds, and must limit their buyers to small rations. All the amusement places are packed: theaters, expensive concerts, high-class restaurants, bars, dance-halls, afternoon teas, cabarets, the races, boxing matches, moving picture houses, tennis courts, fashion shows, and the like. In the summer and fall there were long lines drawn up before every Cook’s bureau, and it was hard to find a vacancy in any of the favorite watering places or sanatoriums. All this shows plainly enough that the Germans still have plenty of money for all kinds of amusements; and when they claimed that they couldn’t meet the reparations payments this was simply a sly bit of camouflage to play up to the world the poverty and misery of the state, while the citizens grow rich and live in luxury.”

It may look like that from without. And may not many a globe-trotter have been deceived by appearances? Our real condition is quite different. It would be criminal to speak one word in defense of this gluttony and craze for enjoyment (which, moreover, has quite frequently been the result of long wars). It is favored by the overburden of taxation which is laid on the citizen by the national government, the individual states, the city, the country commune, and the church. Taxes on incomes, possessions, and property increases, on the returns from the sale of both material and spiritual commodities, inheritances, shares, business contracts, servants, motor cars, theaters and concert tickets—what not? And added to that, a “*Nothopfer*” which requires from the well-to-do one third of their possessions, and even more from the rich, thus bordering on confiscation; while there is further the prospect in the immediate future of a “forced loan” which aims at the same thing in another form.

The assertion that the Germans are not sufficiently taxed is a stupid lie. Every thinking man, no matter how poorly he is paid, must lose ten percent of his wages to the treasury. And the “good fortune” of inheriting a million involves so many expenditures that even the lucky man comes out of it with not more than a few thousand marks. But the ordinary man is not so noble as to deprive himself and his family (who have almost been

The German Conscience

robbed of their hereditary rights) of every pleasure just so that he may hand over the fruits of his labor to the state. He would do that only if he loved this state and said to himself, in a different sense from that of France's *Roi-soleil*, "I am the state".

But things are not like that in modern Germany, and cannot be. Wherever democracy has not taken root as an indispensable custom, a people finds its embodiment of the state in the government. Is the German to love a government which in four years' time has not produced a single piece of constructive work in any field, but has merely complained (about the increasing wretchedness of the country) and cursed (the victors and dictators of the Versailles treaty), depreciating the currency from day to day while its futile "marking time" does not present the same flattering appearance to the eye as during the flash and splendor of the emperors? For centuries the state had meant to the Germans the "superior willed of God": he gave orders and every good citizen had to obey.

The People and the State

To most of them now he is the enemy, the usurper, who made many promises and kept none of them, who was to lead them into a paradise but led them into a hell. Instead of living even more frugally than in pre-war times, and saving money for this state to take from them in taxes and hand over to the Allies (a tiny portion of which their wives and children might inherit) these people are spending whatever they get, squandering their money on pleasures (whether coarse or fine), and are thus shielding themselves against any more extensive confiscations. Civic psychology should have learned also to take human frailties into account.

The mistakes in psychology are supplemented by economic ones. If anyone is having dealings with foreign countries of sound exchange, he is most likely to leave his outstanding debts there, as a protection against governmental seizure or arbitrary socialization; or, in order that he may not see his prices swept down with a new drop in the mark, he will receive payment in the currency of the purchasing country. This promotes the lessening of capital, and favors the rise in foreign rates of exchange. When a person has anything to sell, whether it is an estate, an electric motor, or a sewing needle, he adds the taxes to the price, and thus puts the burden on the purchaser.

The Paper Carousal

THE first result of this rise in prices is that all wages of officials, employees and workmen are increased, and the second that a great deal more paper money must be printed. If a man were to throw a thousand million knives on the market daily, he would hardly be surprised at the quick drop in prices. But the state, which puts a billion marks into circulation daily, is astounded and aggrieved that the value of this paper drops lower from month to month. The increasing of the taxes, prices, wages and salaries; the speedier printing of paper money; the sinking in value of this money: this vicious circle is repeated again and again.

And so long as this paper carousal is revolving, to the barbaric, insinuating music of countless real and fake jazz bands, the superficial



The German Conscience

observer can be led to believe that the German people is faring better than many another, and that all their complaining is intended as a *camouflage*, to deceive the world. But this notion could have resulted only from the error of short-sightedness, and might lead to still other errors. The introduction of the eight-hour working day (in which is counted the time spent in "preparing for work") caused an enormous increase in the army of officials, employees, and workmen of all sorts, and consequently made a gigantic difference in the cost of running both state and private enterprises. For the weight of their number gives these organized masses the power to obtain any demand which guarantees them a minimum living wage. But that is not possible with the middle class, who live (or are trying to live) on incomes or on the returns from individualized activities. An old married couple, or a widow, who in 1914 were assured of an untroubled existence on an income of 6,000 marks a year, cannot buy with that amount to-day a pair of shoes, or any new sheets, and can get nine or ten pounds of butter at the most.

The Small Income

WHAT are they doing, these people who lived on a small income, old men, widows, orphans, savants, pensioned officers and officials, teachers, mental workers of all sorts? Men and women alike, if they are still able, hunt for some new, inferior kind of work: as clerks, bill collectors, seamstresses, foremen, saleswomen. If they are too old or too sick, they send their sons and daughters, to whom they had intended to give a higher education, to work in factories, at trades, in stores, or as typists. They fight down their shyness at the turmoil of the stock exchange (where a neighbor has frequently made considerable money) and take to speculation with what remains of their capital, even at the risk of losing what little income they do have. (Now that the bankers are hindered from advancing credit by the tightness of money, the tide of mad speculation is ebbing, although for years it has penetrated even to the kitchen hearth, even to the cellars of the green grocer, and even now draws the little fellows into its torrent and annihilates them.)

And when all efforts fail, or in a time when a mason earns four to five hundred thousand marks a year and even at that can do no more than barely shield his family from cold and hunger, and when the earnings of all the members in a family are not enough to live on, then these people of the middle class sell, piece by piece, everything that they have inherited or that they have earned themselves in better days: carpets, china, furs, glass, furniture, a silver chain, vases, clocks, ornaments of all kinds, the highly prized piano, the copper kettles in the kitchen, everything that is not absolutely indispensable. These people sink into the proletariat, but without acquiring the advantage of a strong mass organization.

The destitution which holds in its clutches that portion of the people engaged in the higher mental activities

The German Conscience

produces effects that reach far beyond the individual tragedy. Scientific works (new, or brought up to date with the latest investigations) can hardly appear at all. The honorarium that a publisher could offer would not provide the author with even a meager living. And the expenditures for paper, type-setting, printing, binding and shipping would be so great that the price of the book would have to be raised to a forbidding figure. Naturally, the same applies to periodicals. And where can the money come from for subscriptions to scientific reviews which are to be paid for in dollars, pounds sterling, guildens, or Swiss francs, with the mark at only an eight-hundredth or a thousandth of its former value?

Charity, especially American, is doing a great deal. But the only full solution, international aid from the great universities, has still not been made a practicality. And all the other machinery of education must be either renewed or replaced. In school rooms and laboratories the whole apparatus for instruction and experimentation is old and worn out. How can science flourish without literature and instruments? How can it continue fruitful when teachers and students are continually hampered by the discouraging battle against starvation? Many a professor manages to support himself and his family only by means of some job he is secretly holding on the side.

The Student Class

EVEN more difficult is the plight of the students whose impoverished relatives cannot afford to send them large sums monthly. The famous physicist, Albert Einstein, has said with justice, "The great majority of students are so dependent on their earnings that study can only be a secondary occupation." The mere statement of the case is appalling. Many students play the piano, violin, 'cello in public places at night, or serve as waiters, and turn up at the university the next morning exhausted after three hours' sleep in some little attic room. They are shabbily dressed, with shoes that have been resoled repeatedly, and hatless. At noon the *mensa Academica* gives them for a little money, a warm soup or a plate of potatoes and other vegetables. Whole swarms of these destitute students regain their vitality again only during vacations, when they hire out on farms and, with the aid of milk, animal fats, good bread, and meat, are able to forget the wretchedness of their vegetating in the cities.

So this (in a rough outline which the imagination of the reader can easily fill in) is the aspect of life among the middle class which for centuries has been the leader and the impetus of all spiritual development in Germany. Measures of general hygiene (once the pride of all German states and cities) are no longer remotely adequate, although the moral laxity caused by the war, the protracted undernourishment, the expensiveness of all medicines and insufficient accommodations, have made tuberculosis and syphilis into endemic diseases, and brought the rate of child mortality to a new high mark.

8 The German Conscience

All social work, in which many German women and girls displayed great psychological penetration and a typical industry, has been curtailed through lack of funds. The treatment of the poor in public hospitals has been limited more and more each month. And Germany's greatest surgeon, Professor Borchardt, can only look to the humanitarian feeling of Americans for aid. This will enable him to annex a much-needed clinic for women's diseases to the municipal hospital which he conducts in north Berlin, and to install a complete equipment; so that even the poorest can benefit by the master's skill, and he can transmit this skill to his numerous students by that practical experience in operations which is needed before the theoretical lecture can bear results. If any one has looked upon all this destitution, which is borne by many in silence and true dignity, if any one has seen this decay of a whole nation, which is like the crumbling of some venerable cathedral, and if in spite of this he puts it all down as "*camouflage*", then that person has a heart of stone in his breast.

(Next month Mr. Harden will discuss the future prospects of Germany.—Translation by Kenneth Burke.)

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