

THE SOLUTION OF THE GERMAN PROBLEM

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"The German question is the most somber,
the most complicated, the most comprehensive problem of all recent history."

Constantin Frantz (1866)

FOREWORD

It is only too understandable that the seed of hatred the Germans have sown under their National Socialist leadership should now shoot up, though it must be clear to anyone who thinks of the future that the world cannot indefinitely continue in the present state of passionate feeling. Once our initial anger has abated we shall be driven, if ever the fatal process is to be ended, to ask ourselves quietly how it could happen that in a great civilized nation all the forces of evil should be let loose, and what now is the just and sensible way of treating the Germans. The answers to those questions, with justice to their highly complicated character, and to the need for laying bare the historical and psychological roots of National Socialism, no longer brook delay.

The question to which we have thus to find an answer is more than a mere question of National Socialism. It is the German Question, with which generations have been concerned in the past, and which has now faced the world in its latest and acutest form in the rise and the collapse of National Socialism. It is the enigma that the great nation in the center of Europe has more and more become since Bismarck.

It is not likely that anyone will be prepared to boast of the possession of a completely satisfactory answer, and quite certainly nobody is entitled to claim sole possession of the *true* answer. The German question has many aspects, of which one will be seen more clearly by some and another by others with, in each case, quite possibly, vagueness in regard to other aspects or a complete misconception of them. Everyone should be ready

to amplify or correct his views, and every honest and informed contribution deserves to be welcomed.

Much depends upon the distance from which the German problem is considered, and I think there is an optimum distance, not too little and not too great. Closest to the problem is the German living among his fellow countrymen. If he is capable at all of forming any sort of objective judgment, there are many things he will know better than the rest of us, and he will be able to correct not a few misjudgments; but he is not far enough away to be able, with the best of good will, himself to gain a comprehensive view of the whole problem of his nation. "He who only knows his own country," said Lichtenberg, "does not really know even that."

The maximum distance, of course, is that of the foreigner. He has a sharp eye for some things the German misses, and he is able to consider the problem with the outsider's freedom from much that obscures or distorts the closer view; but he has to purchase this advantage with the disadvantage of the lack of a particularly important source of illumination—self-questioning. Between these two points of view, not too close and not too far, stands the man who has lived long enough as a German among Germans to enjoy the German's advantages, and long enough abroad to be able to enjoy the advantages of the foreign observer. He must, of course, take care to avoid two sources of error—that of the sentimental advocate, filled with nostalgia for the fields and woods of his youth, the advocate of men to whom he has become a stranger; and that of the renegade who tries to conceal his origin by wild outbursts of hatred. I have done my best, but I am myself well aware how little that is. I have tried to follow the example of the physician who examines a patient with scientific impartiality, whether he finds him attractive or not. Let us not forget that the patient at present in question has been suffering from a highly infectious disease.

While the main conclusions of this book may be considered as the fruits of the experiences and the studies of a lifetime, and while some parts of it had already been written during the war, it was finished in the spring of 1945—in a race with the

breath-taking events of those months that quickly led the Allies into the heart of Germany. After French and Italian editions, George Allen & Unwin in London published an English translation based principally on the second edition of the Swiss original. In the present American edition the book has been thoroughly overhauled in order to bring it up to date in every respect. While much new material has been added throughout, the last part on the solution of the German problem has been entirely rewritten.

What has been said in this last part on the present situation has been written before the Moscow conference that began in March 1947. Now after the complete futility of this conference has been revealed, there is nothing I feel compelled to add, except two remarks. First, I want to repeat with all possible emphasis that the plan that I present (and that I have been urging for two years now) would be entirely misunderstood if it were taken as a recommendation to leave eastern Germany (or all other territories of eastern Europe, as they are all now more or less in the same situation) to the Russians and to recognize a Russian sphere of influence in that part of Europe. *It is not a plan of retreat but of rally*, and it must be frankly presented as such to the Germans if it is to gain their consent and to assure their indispensable co-operation. There is great danger, however, that it might become a retreat instead of a rally, and help the Russians to win the German game rather than to lose it, if the separation from eastern Germany that has now become a palpable fact were passively accepted by the western Allies as something the Russians imposed on them. That brings me to the second point. It was fairly obvious that at the Moscow conference the Russians could not agree to any plan that reflected the determined will of the western Allies to remain masters in their own German zones. Since also the western Allies could not agree to any plan that reflected the determined will of the Russians to remain masters in their own zone, no compromise was possible and none will be possible in the future. This and not the disagreement about the reparations (where a compromise is at least conceivable) has been the real reason for the failure of

the Moscow conference. It is to be presumed, however, that the Russians, in not even going to the trouble of saving at least some planks of the wreck of the conference, acted in the hope that time will work for them. They are evidently banking on the chance that the western Allies are still afraid to pay the Russians back in their own coin; that therefore no decisive steps will be taken in the political and economic integration of the western zones and in economic reform, so that in November, when a conference will again be held, the economic outlook in Germany will be blacker than ever (and the chances of the Kremlin brighter than ever); that there will be only whining over the Moscow failure combined with touching appeals to the Russians to become nice and reasonable; that in the great struggle about the German soul all the daring and skill will be left to the Russian propaganda, which will appeal to the Germans in the double name of national union and social revolution; that the Communists—who, according to the recent elections, are already almost the strongest party in the industrial heart of western Germany—will gain ground steadily until what is still possible today for the western Allies will be impossible in November. It is up to the western Allies, most of all to the strongest of them, the United States, to crush these evident hopes of the Russians.

I want to express my cordial thanks to Professor Hans Kohn of Smith College and to Mr. Klaus Dohrn for their most gratifying endeavors in bringing about this edition and for their numerous and most helpful suggestions for improving a book that, because of its most intricate subject, can at best never be more than an approximation of the truth.

I have translated the final two chapters and various insertions in the rest of the book myself, so responsibility for their style as well as for their content is mine and should not be attributed to Mr. Dickes, who translated the rest of the work.

WILHELM RÖPKE

Geneva, May 1947

THE TRAGEDY OF A GREAT NATION

THE dictum placed as a motto in front of this book came in 1866 from the pen of a far-seeing and unbending opponent of Bismarck. In that same fateful year of German and European history, Ludwig Bamberger, the eminent German liberal and economist, wrote to his friend von Stauffenberg, after a fresh meeting with an old comrade of the revolution of 1848, Carl Schurz, who later became a Senator and Secretary of the Interior of the United States: "I have greatly enjoyed meeting Schurz. That is what we could become if we were not stuck in a dog-kennel."¹ Almost eighty years later, Roosevelt, President of the country to which Carl Schurz, like so many others of the best Germans, had rendered inestimable service after 1848, spoke of the Germans as the "tragic nation."

No one, indeed, who studies the thousand years of the Germans' history from Otto I down to Adolf Hitler, and who in our day has witnessed their physical, political, and moral suicide, can resist the feeling of being present at a tragedy such as the history of the world has never before seen, a true tragedy in which guilt and destiny have been interlinked. Other nations have known good and evil fortune, but when in all their political history have the Germans experienced genuine and lasting success in anything? Temperament, geographical situation, and historical inheritance have set difficulties enough in their path, but on top of that, all conceivable circumstances seem to have conspired again and again, whenever the Germans seemed at last to be reaching sound and stable conditions, to wreck the prospect at the very moment of approaching realization—be it the tragic

¹ Erich Eyck, *Bismarck* (London: George Allen & Unwin).

cancer of the larynx that struck down Friedrich III in 1888, or the fateful reconstruction of the President's palace in the summer of 1932. That building operation brought Hindenburg to East Prussia, and so directly under the influence of the *Junkers* then menaced by the *Osthilfe* scandal. Thus is prepared the way for his acceptance of Hitler.

What strength, what inspiration has proceeded from the central country of our continent in those thousand years! What talent, what honest and indeed desperate endeavor to gain the mastery over fate! And again and again the Germans' effort has been fruitless—so much so that the whole history of Germany until 1866 (the year in which Germany ceased to exist, making way for a Greater Prussia) may be described as simply a history of frustration. Nowhere is it more natural than on Swiss soil to note how close together lie here the two opposite examples of a federalization that succeeded and one that failed throughout a thousand years—Switzerland and Germany, two countries bearing much the same relation to each other as two animals subjected to biological experiment, one of them receiving a particular vitamin and the other not.² An obvious question, however, is whether there is not a danger that the ultimate consequences of the German fiasco might have very undesirable repercussions on the success of any tolerably sound political, economic, social, and spiritual structure in other countries. What that implies will be considered later.

Let us hold on to the fact that the Germans, who today have become *odium generis humani*, are a people with whom fate has played a more evil game than with any other—fate and their own failure. What is worst of all is that this unique history—above all in its last and most fateful hundred years—has left deep traces in the German character that have made the Germans one of the most complex and problematic and, in the end, one of the most hated of all nations. Thus, on top of all their other troubles, they have to bear the dislike of the rest of the world, which still further worsens their situation. In this, as in

² For the source of the structure of the Swiss state, see now William E. Rappard, *Cinq siècles de sécurité collective* (1291-1798), Geneva and Paris, 1945.

so many other things, they strikingly resemble another tragic nation of world history, the Jews; this has been noted again and again by acute observers, and is probably the final cause of the quite peculiar relation between Germans and Jews, which departs from normal to fall now into hatred and now into liking.

Since we have touched on this exceedingly complicated relationship between Germans and Jews, let us recall that during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries any violent anti-Semitism as it was then endemic in most countries of eastern and southeastern Europe was practically unknown in Germany, and that Jews were feeling much at home in Germany, perhaps more so than in most neighboring countries. Their influence on German cultural and economic life was at that time extraordinary, and some of the best friends of Kaiser Wilhelm II were Jews. Again and again during the First World War there were attempts in the Allied countries to account for Germany's less attractive traits as due not only to a "Prussification" but also to a "Judification." It is significant that the German philosopher Max Scheler when publishing in 1917 an interesting book on *The Causes of the Hatred of the Germans* had been driven to deal precisely with that charge.

There is no intention here of making an urgent appeal for sympathy, still less of making any absurd attempt to alter in the least the world's judgment concerning the unspeakable ideas and ideologies that carried Germany into the deepest abyss of her history and at the same time brought infinite misery upon all Europe. What we are concerned with, however, is one of the leading countries of the West, a country that has given mankind some of its greatest minds, an industrious and reliable nation, talented and endowed with not a few virtues, a nation whose culture is rooted in the same soil as that of the other European nations, whose language is one of our own languages, and of whose nationals we esteem many and love some. At the same time, we are concerned with a nation whose name, once standing so high, is today linked with atrocities that have turned a Brueghel vision of Hell into appalling reality.

How in the world has this nation come to such an end? We

wrote of "suicide," and even in the case of the German nation, in spite of the terrible things it had to suffer, it is to be hoped that the term will remain no more than a metaphor; but how can this nation regain health and find the way back to its true self and to community with the West? What should be our own attitude, the attitude of the world outside Germany, to this nation after its terrible fall, what should be the attitude of those who but a little while ago trembled in face of its leaders and who were compelled, in infinite rage, to submit to witness the submission of others to the worst things the mind of man can conceive? These are the questions to which we have to find a satisfactory answer, difficult as the task may be. They are questions that torment us so that we could say with Heinrich Heine:

*Denk' ich an Deutschland in der Nacht,
Dann bin ich um den Schlaf gebracht—*

"If in the night I think of Germany, I am robbed of my sleep."

This German problem can scarcely be exceeded either in difficulty or in importance by any other problem of our day. Whether we will or no, the future of Europe depends on our succeeding at last after this war in attaining what three past generations have failed to attain, the peaceful reintegration of Germany in Europe, and with it the protection of Europe against Germany and of Germany against herself. We know that with a sick Germany in her midst Europe is doomed to final ruin, and nobody can ignore the fact that Europe cannot do without Germany if she is to maintain her place in the world.

The study, however, of the German problem, conceived in a broad historical and sociological sense, is scarcely less revealing in another respect. Not until we have grasped the fateful development of Germany since 1866 do we reach a full understanding of many symptoms of decay in the social, economic, and intellectual life of the West. Not until then is the full significance realized of the dangerous currents that are due, almost everywhere, either directly to German influence or to conditions similar to the German conditions. The investigation

of the German problem means the study of the social and cultural crisis of the West in the special case of a nation that has fallen a victim to it in an almost unique way, and has become one of the worst sources of infection of the rest of the world. It means the setting up of a warning beacon for all; but our situation would be indeed desperate if we were to do this without any hope—hope for Germany as well as for the rest of the world.

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PART I

THE THIRD REICH AND
ITS END

For despotically ruled states there is no
salvation except in downfall.

FRIEDRICH SCHILLER, "*Ueber Völker-
wanderung, Kreuzzüge und Mittelalter*"

