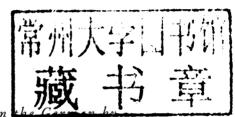


### DIARY OF A MAN IN DESPAIR

#### FRIEDRICH RECK



Translated from

**PAUL RUBENS** 

Afterword by

RICHARD J. EVANS

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

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#### DIARY OF A MAN IN DESPAIR

FRIEDRICH RECK (1884–1945) was born Friedrich Percyval Reck-Malleczewen in Masuria, East Prussia, the son of a prosperous conservative politician and landowner. Having initially complied with his father's wishes to pursue a military career, he left the army to begin medical studies. By the beginning of the First World War, for which he was ruled unfit to serve, he had begun work as a full-time theater critic and travel writer. In the following decades he became a well-known figure in Munich society, the author of both literary historical novels and popular entertainments including *Bomben auf Monte Carlo* (Bombs on Monte Carlo), a best-selling comic novella and the basis of a hit musical film starring Peter Lorre. In October 1944 he was arrested for the first time; in December of the same year the Gestapo returned to detain him again; in January 1945 he arrived at the Dachau concentration camp, where he was to die shortly after.

PAUL RUBENS (1927–2003), a self-educated native New Yorker, mastered the German language as a member of the U.S. occupation forces after World War II.

RICHARD J. EVANS is Regius Professor of History and president of Wolfson College, Cambridge. He is the author of *The Third Reich at War*.

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## May 1936

Spengler is dead, then. And just as a deceased maharajah has the right to have all his retainers buried with him, this preponderant personality was, a few days later, followed in death by Albers, who had handled his work at the Beck publishing firm. Albers died in a truly grisly fashion. He threw himself under the wheels of the Starnberg train, and his bloody corpse was found on the tracks, legs severed at the thighs.<sup>1</sup>

As for Spengler, our last meeting was just a few weeks ago on Bayerstrasse, in Munich. As usual, he had been attired in expensive tweeds. As usual, too, his brow had been dark, and his tone angry; his deep hurt and thirst for revenge on those who had hurt him emerged in a series of striking prognoses. It had been worth one's while to spend time with him.

I still remember our first meeting, when Albers brought him to my house. On the little carriage which carried him from the station, and which was hardly built with such loads in mind, sat a massive figure who appeared even more enormous by virtue of the thick overcoat he wore. Everything about him had the effect of extraordinary permanence and solidity: the deep bass voice; the tweed jacket, already, at that time, almost habitual; the appetite at dinner; and at night, the truly Cyclopean snoring, loud as a series of buzz saws, which frightened the other guests at my Chiemgau country house out of their peaceful slumbers.

This was at a time when he was not really successful, and before he had done an about-face and marched into the camp of the oligarchy of industrial magnates, a retreat which determined his life from then on. It was a time when he was still capable of being gay and unpreoccupied, and when he could sometimes even be persuaded to venture forth in all his dignity for a swim in the river. Later, of course, it was unthinkable that he expose himself in his bathing suit before ploughing peasants and farmhands, or that he climb, a huffing and puffing Triton, back onto the river bank in their presence!

He was the strangest amalgam of truly human greatness and small and large frailties that I have ever encountered. If I recall the latter now, it is part of my taking leave of him, and so I am sure it will not be held against me. He was the kind of man who likes to eat alone – a melancholy-eyed feaster at a great orgy of eating. With a certain amusement, I recall one evening when he joined Albers and me for a light supper. It was during the final weeks of the First World War, when there was not a great deal one could set before one's guests. But, discoursing and declaiming the whole time, Spengler finished an entire goose without leaving us, his table companions, so much as a bite.

His passion for huge dinners (the check for which was later picked up by his industrial Maecenas) was not his only diverting attribute. After I had met him, still before his first major success, he asked me not to come to visit him at his little apartment (I believe it was on Agnesstrasse,<sup>2</sup> in Munich). The reason he gave was that his apartment was too confined, and he wanted to show me his library in surroundings appropriate to its monumental scope.

Then, in 1926, after he had found his way to the mighty rulers of heavy industry<sup>3</sup> and had moved to expensive Widenmayerstrasse on the banks of the Isar, he did, indeed, invite me to see the succession of huge rooms in his apartment there. He showed me his carpets and paintings, and even his bed – which was truly worth seeing, because it looked more like a catafalque – but he became visibly disconcerted when I said that I was still looking forward to seeing the library. After overcoming his reluctance to

show it to me, I found myself in a rather small room. And there – on a well-battered walnut bookstand, alongside a row of Ullstein books and detective stories – stood what are commonly called 'dirty books'.

But I have never known a man with so little sense of humour and such sensitivity to even the smallest criticism. There was nothing he abhorred so much as humbug; yet along with all the magnificent deductions in *The Decline of the West*, he allowed a host of inaccuracies, inadvertencies, and actual errors to stand uncorrected – such as that Dostoyevsky came into the world in St Petersburg rather than in Moscow, and that Duke Bernhard of Weimar died *before* Wallenstein was assassinated – and important conclusions were drawn from these errors. Mistakes like these could happen to anyone; but woe to the man who dared make Spengler aware of them!

I remember a delightful scene which took place at my house, when, as was his custom after dinner, he fell to lecturing and preaching at the same time that he catechised a follower of his who was present. What was amusing was that this proselyte, who was just back from Africa where he had caught a severe case of malaria, had fallen asleep and was snoring very loudly in his armchair; but between one snore and the next, by the principle of automatic response to 'his Master's voice', he promptly answered, in faultless Spenglerian jargon, every question put to him by the great man. Spengler, the Master, might well have been pleased, and he certainly should have been able to laugh at this incident. Instead, he was deeply hurt, and would have nothing to do with the culprit thereafter.

To repeat, he was truly the most humourless man I have ever met; in this respect, he is surpassed only by Herr Hitler and his Nazis, who have every prospect of dying of a wretchedness compounded by their own deep-rooted humourlessness and the dreary monotony of public life which, under their domination, has taken on the rigidity of a corpse and is now in its fourth year of

suffocating us to death. But he who believes that I want to do Spengler an injury by recounting his many weaknesses is in error. I need not cite his indispensable early work on Theocrates,<sup>4</sup> nor the fact that he gave form at last to the presentiments of an entire generation. Whoever has met him knows about the nimbus of the significant that attached to him and that was not dissipated even in his off-guard moments; knows that in him lived on the representation of the best in humanist pedagogy; knows about his countenance, which reflected the same stoicism found in busts of the late Roman period.

As to whether or not he ever perceived the rising of the irrational on the horizon of our existence where it can now be seen, whether he sensed that the 'decline of the West' announced by him was actually only the decline of the world created by Renaissance man in the last four hundred years - this I do not know. For it was his destiny that midway in his course he fell into dependency on the heavy-industry oligarchy, and this dependency began in time to have an effect on his thinking. I, at least, with the best will in the world, do not otherwise know how to reconcile the truly magnificent prophesying of the approaching Dostovevskian Christianity. made in 1922 in the second volume of Decline, with the technocratic rhetoric which fills his later work. It was his tragedy that a highly intellectualised, and I might say, a seedy-teacher kind of negativity, kept him from believing in the gods, much less in God. His followers began to leave him around 1926, when he made his peace with contemporary Germany - not with the Nazis, for I know of no one who hated them as he did, on lying down, in sleeping, and in rising up! - but with those businessmen-on-horseback from the Ruhr, who made themselves the real masters of the state following the downfall of the monarchy and who were more than happy to satisfy Spengler's longing for a lifestyle that was patrician as well as somewhat hedonistic. The surging power of his mind, to which we owe the vision of his early works, was cut off from the time the ravens - not those of St Anthony, but those of the Messrs

Thyssen and Hösch – began to supply his table with good burgundies.

Thus was he betrayed by his own epicurean inclinations and his passion for the rich sauces and incomparable culinary skill of his sisters, who kept house for him. The Nazis – in their so-called newspapers edited by such people as one-time schoolteachers with peculiar records and army lieutenants of the First World War who have done nothing since – are exulting over the fact that Spengler supposedly came around to their way of thinking; they are also saying that, one by one, the same thing is happening to the rest of the opposition. But the second, unpublished volume of Spengler's Years of Decision, the first volume of which nearly made him a martyr, lies safely stored in a bank vault in Switzerland,<sup>5</sup> awaiting the resurrection toward which all our hopes turn.

# July 1936

From Munich - now appearing almost foreign - from Prussianoccupied Munich, comes an amusing tale. It concerns Herr Esser,6 the Minister of Transport, who, in view of his known activities, should really be called the Minister of Sexual Transports. This Esser had an affair with the daughter of the owner of a tavern, and was so badly beaten by the father that he could neither go out nor, compromised as he was, remain in Munich. In accordance with the style of this regime, which has simply discarded decency as so much excess baggage, he was promoted shortly thereafter to a much higher post in Berlin. From there, he has just announced that travelling abroad by an individual has now become a thing of the past, and that henceforth a German can leave his country only as part of a herd, the 'Strength Through Joy' organisation. We have, therefore, every prospect of losing whatever remains of our freedom of movement, and of thus becoming completely the prisoners of this horde of vicious ages who three years ago seized power over us.

I had a most enlightening talk recently with a man about the Nazis, and how they had come to power. He said that this so-called German Revolution<sup>7</sup> is really based on simple blackmail. This is his story.

Old Hindenburg had always been a poor man. He decided near the end to change that situation, and he had his son, Oskar, take over his business affairs. Oskar speculated on the stock exchange, and when the crash came suddenly, owed 13 million marks. To make this back, Oskar then let himself get involved in the Eastern Relief manipulations – I do not believe his father knew – and the

Nazis found out in 1932. (The fall of the Brüning Cabinet is very likely connected.) The Hitlerites got photostats of the incriminating documents, and from then on had the whip hand.

Hindenburg had always before that kept Hitler away. He may well have said that 'I wouldn't make that Bohemian<sup>8</sup> corporal Postmaster, much less Chancellor,' as reported. But by the summer of 1932, he was no longer a free agent. Otherwise how could he, the Chief of State, have said absolutely nothing when Hitler had the effrontery to send a telegram congratulating the Nazi murderers at Potempa?<sup>9</sup>

At the end of 1932, questions in the Reichstag about the Eastern Relief boondoggle began to touch on Hindenburg's Neudeck estate. The Hindenburg group began to be very worried. Then came the Berlin strike, 10 to make the people in von Papen's cabinet more amenable to the Nazi 'solution'. Hitler felt that he could now press to be named Chancellor.

The story dovetails perfectly with information I have from other sources. Gregor Strasser,<sup>11</sup> who was killed in the Röhm Putsch, hinted something of the same thing to me in November 1932. This also explains the secret conferences at von Papen's villa between the Hindenburg group and the Nazis. Frau von Schröter<sup>12</sup> acted as mediator at these talks, and von Papen, who had been trembling for the safety of his wife's fortune ever since the Transport Strike, played a strange role at them.

And this explains, finally, the report, which keeps cropping up despite every denial, that von Schleicher, <sup>13</sup> who was on the other side in this intrigue, had Oskar von Hindenburg arrested at the Friedrichstrasse railroad station, and held overnight, following the break with the old President. General von Bredow, who was killed along with Schleicher in the Röhm Putsch a year and a half later, reportedly was the arresting officer.

So it seems that we owe the unutterable misery into which we have come to blackmail and to a financial lapse of Paul von Hindenburg.

I am not in a position to be judge of a dead man. I consider that his lack of decision when the monarchy was threatened, on 9 November 1918, was treason to the Crown. The story about his deathbed encounter<sup>14</sup> with Hitler has given me a great deal of food for thought.

Hindenburg refused to have Hitler come to his bedside. But Hitler was not to be put off that way: his prestige was at stake. He forced his way in, and got his blessing. Hindenburg had never forgiven himself for his betrayal of the Kaiser sixteen years before. He evidently confused Hitler with the Kaiser, stroked his hand, and begged him to forgive him.

If even a small part of all this is true, the truth, when it emerges, will shake the country. I am not concerned about the old man's image: Old Hindenburg simply was unable to measure up to the situation. I do not believe he was capable of doing anything wrong, with all his faculties. And it may well be that his slowness to react, during the First World War, often saved a battle that Ludendorff's wildly pragmatic manoeuvring was about to lose.

General Hoffmann<sup>15</sup> was an aide, and his widow recently showed me a letter her husband had written her in the fall of 1914, just before the German advance through northern Poland. It read: 'He [Hoffmann meant Hindenburg] spends most of the time hunting, gets back to headquarters at night, has next day's order read off to him, and says: "Begad, fellas, I couldn't do any better myself!" Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg will be coming for a briefing on the strategic situation. We will have to tell the General what to think. He does not even know where his troops are stationed.'

I repeat, I am not going to judge a dead man. Hindenburg did not have the stature for the position he was given. He was also too old, and very likely too sick to handle it. But the stupidity of an entire people in agreeing to this combination of corruption and inadequacy in its leadership is something else again. The cabinet system is responsible, too: as long as this country agrees to that political institution, it will have to bear the confusion, convulsions, and political mayhem which accompany it. No, the Germans as they now are need a master. And by this I most certainly do not mean that forelocked gypsy type we have been given to lead us in our hour of need.