

GERMANY AND THE GERMANS



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GERMANY AND THE GERMANS

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FOREWORD

THE peculiar quality of a particular nation is the result of the interplay of land, people, and individual. This peculiar quality, this German aroma, pervades everything German: the faces of the people, the clouds in the sky, the flowers and fields, the farm cart and the engine, the food and drink, the towns and the villages; it informs our language, our professional and official life; it can be detected in our way of thinking, in our science and in the course of our history. This book is an attempt to seize hold of this subtle essence and to subject it to the hard discipline of words.

But owing to the difficulty of depicting the German scene with the requisite amount of detachment, the task I had undertaken was, I found, no easy one. For it was not my intention to describe Germany from any particular angle or point of view, whether political, historical, philosophical or racial; I merely wanted to show how Germany appears to one who approaches it entirely objectively, with the help only of his eyes and ears.

Nor has this book been written from the standpoint of any particular science. It attempts to go beyond both politics and science, and is thus perhaps most readily to be labelled philosophical. However, the sciences, and in particular the science of geography, have been freely drawn upon. One might indeed describe the book as a philosophical or artistic geography; in a word, as 'Geophilosophy.'

But no sooner had I begun the work than I realized that before I could penetrate to what was distinctively German I must first work through the stratum of modern conditions which covers Germany as it covers the whole planet—a

stratum which affects all nations equally and which presents the most critical problem of our age. In this way I was moved to write another book first: 'Der Weg durch das Wirrsal. Das Erlebnis unserer Zeit.'

This interest in Germany and its problems is no doubt primarily due to my father's influence. Many were the journeys we took together on which he would teach me to observe the characteristics of the different nations; the problem of Germany was a continual source of both interest and anxiety to him, and many of his ideas and opinions may well have found their way into this work.

It is to Karl Rosner that I owe the original impetus to write this book, and I am indebted to three other friends, Friedrich Kottje, Hugo Niederaastroth, and Hans Rosenfeld, for their help and encouragement during the course of the work.

E. DIESEL.

POTSDAM,
August, 1929.

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INTRODUCTION

I

THE FLEETING BACKGROUND

WE Germans are imbedded in our own history as a tree or insect is imbedded in nature. Just as their destiny may be bound up in a gust of wind, a flower, or a rain-drop, so are we determined by the swords and playthings, by the quality and passions, of our ancestors. From them come the actions, the way of thought, and the mistakes of those around us today.

But the qualities of nature are constant and eternal: not so the nations. Visit a nation a second time, and it will not in all respects be the same nation that one visited before. Every day the peoples are changing through the influences of birth and death, intermarriage and emigration, through altering ideas and fate. In fact, it is not easy to decide whether the changing or the permanent is the stronger. The language alters, the race alters. Foreign races speak and feel 'German,' 'German'-looking peoples speak a strange tongue, German-speaking peoples grow to hate Germany. Territories are won and lost. Feelings and faces, characteristics and manners, which seem to be the very essence of the race, come and pass again.

Groups, numbering maybe millions, within a single nation are hostile to each other, whereas several groups from various nations will form a sort of common unity. In time of war allied races or nations turn suddenly from friends to foes; a fervid unity embraces for a period the squabbling groups of yesterday; and that mysterious concept, the state, has power of life and death—a state over which now this flag and now that may wave.

The history of civilization is for ever on the search for

what is characteristically German. We must realize that the essentially characteristic no longer exists, that these traits may apply equally well to other peoples also.

When the Germanic bronze age was on the wane, the iron age took its place. Buried under the 'Limes,' the Roman frontier wall, we frequently come upon non-Germanic weapons. Our German grape is really Roman, the armour of the medieval knight was derived from the Roman legionary. The apple and the cherry, now so German in taste and smell, hail from ancient gardens of Greece and Italy. A step further down the path of history and we find ourselves among Roman and Christian hybrids, sarcophagi, Roman cubiform capitals, altars. Stone seems to predominate, and not only because wood and other materials decay more readily: the solid saints and kings with their huge eyes and long hair and fat fingers raised in exhortation, the lavabos, the pillars, were all made of stone. The simple round arch was the norm with these Germans, who under the pressure of foreign influences first and gradually awoke to a state of self-consciousness. Even in those first German towns, which developed after the great migration out of the old Roman settlements, the Roman priest, the Jewish merchant, and the adventurer from every land of East and West plied their trade beside their broad-shouldered German neighbours.

Gradually in this museum of the ages the cool gleam of stone, of Byzantine gold and jewels, is enlivened by the warmer hues of thread-worn ecclesiastical garments, wooden crosses and gay carvings. As we pass down the stages of history, everything seems to become more familiar, whether it be that we are nearer by some centuries to the things in question, or that their quality is somehow more 'German.' Also more is rescued from the sands of time. We find ever more woven fabrics, clothes, wooden articles and coloured objects, weapons; forms become more intricate, the arches over door and window more pointed.

The spirit of man expresses its heavenward urge in its newly built habitations. With its crinkly Gothic script, its chess-boards, dice, its gloves and playing-cards, books and proverbs, the age comes ever nearer to our own familiar everyday life. Gay woodcuts tell of tourneys, of soldiery and weddings. What charm and piety, what loveliness and derring-do, this age vouchsafes to us in song and picture! What honest virtue it displays and yet how crude and brutal with its witches, its devils and 'iron maidens'! All this has grown out of that Roman-Christian-Germanic world, which becomes ever more and more what one means by 'German,' and which at the same time seems ever to be changing into something more and more un-German.

For on to this solid German world the clear skies of the Renaissance begin to shed their light, a light welcome to the pride of the rich burghers and the ever-growing hordes of German princes; a light welcome above all to German scholarship, which, originating with the scholastic monks, now begins to penetrate the ranks of the awakening bourgeoisie and creates with its fat printed folios an entirely new intellectual stratum. The wainscoting on the walls of the houses becomes richer and more elaborate. Greece and Rome curl and crinkle, a little gothically perhaps, in the service of the 'German Renaissance.' Pillars take on Corinthian and Ionic capitals. Presses enchant us with their fine inlaid work. We wander in huge ornamental gardens, observe Mars, Jupiter and Diana beside Adam and Eve, with their solid limbs and German faces. Hector and Achilles look down on us from tapestries of Brabant. But suddenly this still air of culture and scholarship and elegance is rent by a shout that seems to come from the depths of the Middle Ages, the battle-cry of Luther. Thus even in those days Germany was a tangle of conflicting forces, much more intricate than ever Greece or Rome.

Now we find ourselves in a mighty hall, crowded with

armour, the tents and breech-loaders of the Swedish king, countless pikes, halberds, and pennants. The dogs of war break loose on German soil; and the German countenance, hitherto so firm and strong, begins to take on the less decided, heavier quality that it bears today. Through this scene of agony, the greatest ever suffered by any European people, pass the figures of a thousand petty princes; Germany becomes a sort of monstrous colony of France, French begins to be the spoken language. Richly robed princesses, courtly hunts and carnivals fill the foreground of the picture, rococo beauties murmur like amorous Cupids through the brilliant palace chambers.

But now these pastoral dallies give place to a new element. The bourgeois spirit, lit as it were by classical inspirations, rises clear and strong over Germany and the world. The German seeks his bride in the Ideal; Poetry and Philosophy become his province. The Romantic Age dawns and passes, and step by step and yet with magic suddenness something peculiarly our own, the bourgeois, the industrial, appears and bears down upon us people of today, like an arrow making for its goal. Names appear, whose bearers our own grandparents revered in the flesh; music, which we ourselves strummed in our childhood; science, which is already the science of modern times.

Poetry, music, philosophy, till recently the essence of all that was German, begin to lose their magic. The new way of writing is so unlike the old that the thread of the ancient German national character would seem to be breaking in twain; the spiritual life of the nation is suddenly felt to be thin and dry. The car from the American factory has taken its place for the modern German youth—that youth whose forebear some hundred and fifty years ago wept tears with Werther, and whose own father himself discovered the automobile.

Even the land and soil, even the climate, are subject to change. The earth slowly alters its face: the sea-coast fluctuates, the annual mean temperature rises or falls, the

cliff crumbles away. Time never stands still! Each attempt of ours to try and reduce to an artificial order the features of an age collapses in the end. It must make way for new concepts and attitudes, which in their turn form the starting-point for further stages in the everlasting process of rise and decline, of birth and death. Change is always gnawing away at those ideas, Nation, People, State, Fatherland, which we implant like artificial islands in the stream of human history.

II

THE LAND WITHOUT DESIGN

Most states have grown from small beginnings. The Roman Empire possessed in Rome an ideal nucleus, round which was grouped the rest of the then known world. England, with its unbroken sea-board, stood ready to fulfil its destiny, as soon as London became the seat of an Anglo-Saxon people. France established itself with its capital in the 'Bassin de Paris,' which was in its turn connected up with the rest of the country; and as though with a trumpet-call it takes its place in the European arena. Russia has ever tried to keep within the boundaries of its endless steppes.

But Germany, even as a geographical unit, has always lacked clear definition; it cannot be brought into the pattern of other nations. It has never had one *Reich*, one sea-coast to delineate it and mark it off from its neighbours, one great pre-eminent capital city, one mighty plain on which to settle its people, a clear central point. Rather, Germany in its entirety has served as the central point of Europe.

The history of Germany shows us that its moving forces have also been without a real focus. It has had countless aims, but never expended its strength for a really long period in the service of one great plan. The whole

German people has never been moved simultaneously by one harmonious historical current. There is something unsteady and restless about its development; its aims and tendencies keep changing. Particular goals have been reached, but there has been much frustration and failure. Many things have been begun, attained after fierce struggle, but without growing to maturity have survived only by the force of dogma. Germany has always been a sort of melting-pot. North and south have developed independently: on the one hand we have the north with its coast-line and Slav, Danish and English influences; and on the other the mountainous districts of the south. A structure formed from a thousand warring elements is what we are finally left with. We were tossed to and fro between kaiser and princes, Guelfs and Ghibellines, between Rome and the Reformation, the pride of the city states and the Habsburg Empire. Everything was done by halves: the colonization of the east, the defence of the west, our maritime explorations, our aristocracy, democracy and revolution. Thirty years long German fought with German on German soil, and the only result was to make confusion worse confounded. Never has Germany experienced a really unified leadership; the World War was its first all-embracing national experience, and that ended in disaster.

The structure and position of the country and the character of its inhabitants supply a partial explanation of the endless quarrels and dissensions to which it has been exposed. But in addition to this Germany is the pivot round which all European movements take place. Thus it resembles a conglomeration of larger and smaller ice-floes which, when they collide, sometimes split asunder and sometimes freeze together. In Germany they were split asunder by war, politics, religious strife, by arrogance and egoism; while they were frozen together by treaties, tariff unions, by imperial whim, and by small but insufficient centres of power, until finally Prussia with its greater

resources and statecraft spread its dominion south and westwards.

Germany has developed without a focal point either internally or externally; it has developed out of isolated units without the whole ever being under one firm leadership; out of peoples scattered on its confines or huddled together in its centre, without a capital town or leading state, without a ruling race or class to be an example to the whole people.

When particular episodes of German history have run their course, Germans have always found themselves confronted with chaos. Whereas with a stable people, like the English, revolutions and wars glide past with no more alarum than a ship on the ocean.

Germany is the land without design, for it seems to lack clear will or ordered measure. It cannot be compared with any other nation. Sweden has more in common with Norway and Finland, England with France or Holland, Italy with Spain, than Germany with any other land whatever.