

THE SOUL OF THE NATION

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HERE are some observations I wrote in 1918, in a review of Marika Stiernstedt's fine book, *The Soul of France*:

"Despite all talk of the individual goodness or wickedness of the different Englishmen, Frenchmen or Germans, it cannot be denied that now in this war every country is personified in our eyes. We conceive of the souls of nations as personalities.

"I am trying to remember that impression of things German which once struck me as something fine and good. Landscapes, towns whose beauty had about it something in the style of miniature painting—an atmosphere of beautiful childhood books. I think of the faces of a time long past that can be seen in the art galleries: their beauty lay in their quiet and peace. I think of verses which reproduce to our complete delight the soft, unconscious emotions of the soul. Always a resemblance to the atmosphere of Snow White, who lies sleeping in her glass coffin somewhere in the midst of the hills and valleys of Germany. But—a violent movement, a gesture, an outbreak of strong emotion—and it all becomes ugly, clumsy, unreal and ridiculous. While France—she of course is the grace of mind and body—the French countryside where the skies and the light gather all isolated things together to make one grandiose, solemn unity.

"It seems inconceivable to me that the people of Germany would ever give up their militarism—whatever it may cost. In reality the German people needs its militarism as the lobster needs its shell—a hard, outer armor for a soft, boneless body. If Germany is to be united and a great power, the harsh discipline of Prussianism and the Prussian administration are certainly essential prerequisites—they are the shell that gives strength and mobility to a people whose inmost structure is soft and lacking in elasticity.

"But for that reason it is not envy or begrudging, nor even fear primarily, that impels those who look on Germany's successes with horror. It is the instinct to espouse the cause of the man that has firmness and a backbone, and a soft, sensitive skin toward the outer world in the fight with the dreadful claws of the giant crab.

"A mysterious depth of meaning can be found in the smallest things. Marika Stiernstedt, the well-known Swedish authoress, has put on her book the woman sower of the French stamps as a vignette. By way of contrast, think of the German stamps with Germania—with the spiked helmet on her head and two more helmets on her breast: even the source of mother's milk is encased in armor. And now look at the sower: unshielded and free, her

beautiful body moves within the airy robe; buoyant and light of foot, she strides in the wind and scatters her kernels of seed.

"Yes, she well embodies the soul of France; and she cannot keep 'the neutrality of the soul', for she knows that she is fighting for her life against the loathsome *fascies* on the triumphal column, that wish to bless the world with their shell, and teach it to think automatically and grotesquely.

"But then the soul of France has always scattered kernels of seed. In the history of Europe, France has always been like the fairy godmother in fairy tales; the world will become really frightful if the fairy godmother is conquered."

It is possible that I should not have expressed myself so soberly and objectively about the soul of Germany if I had then thought that 25 years later the claws of the giant crab would close around my homeland too. For my premonition was to prove correct: the German people did not give up their militarism. And they will certainly never do so voluntarily.

The power and glory of the Hohenzollerns passed: the last Kaiser of the glorious house made his inglorious exit. And we who knew Germany before the first World War, and witnessed, struck with wonder as it were, the pious veneration of the Kaiser by every average German—of a Kaiser whom the whole world found a little comical, however much they might disagree in other respects in their judgment of the nature of Kaiser Wilhelm II—we could not readily imagine what these normal, average Germans would now do. Gone were all the petty kings, all the princes, all the splendid uniforms that had delighted the eyes and the hearts of the upper and lower middle-classes whenever they were treated to a display of the radiance of the Courts or of the Army. I remember an old soldier who had served at the front; he seemed in somewhat poor health and extremely nervous; he was a guide in one of the small palaces in Nymphenburg in 1925. The whole time he was leading us through the gilded rococo rooms, he spoke almost convulsively of the vanished royal house of Bavaria, which he apparently revered idolatrously, not concerned in the least with the fact that the unhappy Wittelsbach House had been infected with insanity for generations. "We Germans cannot live without masters whom we can look up to", he broke out, and tears gushed from his eyes. My mother and I murmured some sympathetic words, and tried to escape him—very bashful as we Nordic peoples are wont to be whenever we are forced to witness the spectacle of the emotional exhibitionism of the Germans.

No move in the ingenious playing of Adolph Hitler on the most sensitive strings of the psychology of the German people was more ingenious than that he demanded that he be worshipped as a divine being. In this way he met an age-old German need, a need that is the *leitmotiv* in the medieval German poems of the *Nibelungen*—the aspiration toward unconditional subjection before a lord and master. There could be something fine and beautiful in this ideal of loyalty—if there were not the reverse side, which is clearly expressed even in the *Nibelungenlied*: loyalty to a leader and a master justifies every crime, every lie, every treachery the sworn servant may commit, if he only can believe or persuade himself to believe that he thus is making himself a tool in the service of his master.

In addition to this reverse side, there is also a supplement to this ideal, which makes it even more repulsive in the eyes of most non-German peoples: corresponding to the necessity of feeling the foot of a master on one's neck is the need for having someone under one's self on whom one can himself trample. If Hermann Rauschning's reproduction of Hitler's words is accurate, then the life goal of the German Fuehrer would lie in making this German ideal actual on a scale hitherto unknown. If the success of German arms makes it possible for Germany to dictate a new world peace, he will create a new sort of social order—with a German master race; subdivided like a pyramid, with the godlike figure of the Fuehrer at the top, as it were, and descending steps of upper, middle and lower masters. And under the feet of the lower masters, the conquered peoples, who are to become the helots and slaves of the Germans. No matter how incomprehensible this ideal may seem to us Nordic people, for example—for we find it really as repugnant to step on a living being as to be stepped on, at least so long as we are normal—nevertheless this plan for a new society must say something to the mentality of the average German. In this closely packed *Volkheit*, that because of pressure from above receives the right to oppress those below, the individual is not only liberated from every duty, but also given no opportunity to act independently—which again presupposes that the individual has a backbone, and that his sense of balance is in order.

We in Europe in the immediate past, that is the period which closed with the outbreak of the war now raging, had grown accustomed to regarding human beings as economically determined. The development of society from the far off past up to our present day was supposed to be determined in war as

in peace by economic problems. Just as our ancestors from the Renaissance to the great period of the idea of nationalism are said to have considered man essentially a political being—in this sense the struggles fundamentally were for the freedom of the individual and of the social classes: civil liberties and civil rights. As medieval man thought of himself primarily as a soul, as an immortal individual on the way to eternal salvation or to eternal damnation, in this sense every conflict was a conflict between the faith that alone brings salvation and the faith that leads necessarily to damnation. From every one of these points of view man has made a fundamental observation of one of the essential characteristics of his nature: we are fighting for the well-being of our souls, even when we are trying to deny the existence of the soul. We are fighting as political beings even when we are fighting for the side that will deprive us of our political voice and will let us shake off all individual responsibility as citizens, so that we can hide in a *Volkheit* or in a class or in the masses. And we have fought all along for economic interests—to better our living conditions, or to prevent others from bettering their living conditions at our expense.

But just in these last decades before the present war we were about to discover something more in our own nature as human beings: that our psychic life is influenced much more than we had dreamed by physical factors—by our bodily health or weakness, by the soil on which we live, by the food that we eat, by our relations to the people with whom we live and by their relations to us. And every conflict among men is also a conflict of sick and of healthy souls: there is *one* thing that psychopaths can never manage, and that is to arrive at a peaceful and satisfactory relationship with their fellow men. Again and again in the course of history, the gifted psychopath has found deliverance from his hostile attitude to his fellows by becoming a warlord or a revolutionary. In the dream of a future in which state, humanity, or his own people will have developed to something quite different from what they are to-day, even the psychopath can imagine that he loves at least humanity, if not any single person, for the people who live only in his imagination will never ask of him the impossible: that he should ever live with them.

We should not underestimate the significance which economic affairs have had for the development of Germany in the remote and the immediate past, even when we suggest that it is *likewise* conditioned by many psychopathic traits that can

be proved part of the German *psyche* back into the Middle Ages. Epidemic hallucinations, which other nations have completely conquered by all appearances, seem still to be latent in the German people; for example, anti-Semitism is certainly not an exclusively German phenomenon, but at least we find it difficult to believe that among another people there should be such a revival of the mentality of the days of witch scares and of witch trials as we have seen in the German persecutions of the Jews. In the complex of ideas, which was perfected chiefly by German minds and is the most important contribution of Germany to European culture—the Reformation and Romanticism—schizophrenic as well as manic-depressive traits are predominant. And while it has always seemed to the neighboring nations that the concept of honor is only slightly developed among the Germans—that is, that they did not know our concept of backbone and feeling an individual responsibility, of mental reserve and of self-control in public, for these are our ideal standard of life—yet the Germans have always had their own concept of honor, in a mystic connection with death and destruction.

I remember what a dreadful impression it made on me when in my youth, in the course of my work, I was given the daily task of reading the *Berliner Tageblatt*. There I found constantly recurring notices of youthful suicides—something of which I have never heard other countries talk. Schoolboys who cannot adjust themselves to school, failures in examinations, difficulties in puberty are known throughout the whole world. But that such things can bring children to take their own lives, has probably seemed pretty impossible as yet for all peoples but the Germans.

The duelling code, the epidemics of suicides are an essential complement to German militarism. In former times we were inclined to lay the whole blame for that on militarism, with its terminology of the "mailed fist" and "blood and iron" and "Germany's swordpoint against this and that", on the Junkers and the nobility, on the princes and garrulous Wilhelm II. In the steps of the Junker militarism there has followed a still more fanatical, destructive and unfeeling militarism, representing the German *bourgeoisie* and *petite bourgeoisie*. And for myself I am convinced that if, for instance, a new revolution were to come in Germany in a year and a day, making Nazi Germany into Communistic or Proletarian Germany, the German people

would once more seek its natural expression in a renewed, aggressive militarism.

One thing is sure: Hitler's plan for the construction of a new order in Europe will never be executed, even if he should succeed in destroying every land that still preserves the old European standard of human dignity, civil liberty and the right of the individual to his own private happiness. Militarism has never yet displayed any constructive force. And in the German people there are few resources on which to build a state. The productive forces in the fields in which Germany has really built something—free research, science, and, in part, literature—are now suppressed, or have been driven out of the country, or are vanishing in concentration camps. The most probable outcome is that, in every land where Germany lays its mailed fist, economic and cultural annihilation will follow in the tracks of a victorious Germany, and that Germany will be forced to exert its strength even more severely in the field which has swallowed up all its creative resources, all its constructive imagination, that is in armaments. So that the giant crab, when it has sucked out all the meat of its victims in Europe down to the skin and the bones, can stretch out its claws for prey on other continents!