Jacob Burckhardt on German Sentiment during and after the War with France (1870–72)

Abstract

Like Theodor Fontane (1819–1898), Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) entertained serious reservations about the legitimacy and consequences of the war against France in 1870–71. A Swiss historian of art and culture, particularly the Renaissance, Burckhardt held a professorship in Basel from 1858 until his retirement in 1893. In 1872, he was offered the renowned chair of history formerly held by Leopold von Ranke at the University of Berlin, but he didn't hesitate in declining the offer: "In Basel," he remarked, "I can say what I like." The following excerpts are from four letters that Burckhardt wrote to Friedrich von Preen (1823–1894). Burckhardt had met Preen back in 1864, during one of his walks in the neighborhood of Lörrach in the Black Forest. Preen was prefect of the district, a civil servant of the old school. In these letters, Burckhardt voices his uneasiness about Germany's aspirations to become a great power in Europe after its victory over France. "O, my dear friend," he writes, "where will it all end?" He also mentions the "new politics," which might demand an "absolutist regime" to counteract the effects of universal manhood suffrage and the rising tide of militarism in state and society.

Source

I. To Friedrich von Preen, Basel, September 27, 1870

[Esteemed Sir and Friend]

[…]

Since receipt of your letter [of August 21], I have been waiting and waiting to see whether a pause, an armistice, might not give me time to bring some kind of clarity into the whole problem. But events move on. France is to drink the dregs of misery and disorder, before being really allowed to speak. O, my dear friend, where will it all end? Does no one realize that the pestilence from which the conquered are suffering may also infect the victors? This frightful revenge would only be (relatively) justified if Germany were in fact the completely innocent victim of unprovoked attack that she is given out to be. Is the *Landwehr* to go right on to Bordeaux and Bayonne? Logically the whole of France would have to be occupied by a million Germans for many years. I know quite well it will not happen, but that is what one would have to deduce from what has happened hitherto. You know I have always had a mania for prophesying and have already met with some astonishing rebuffs; but this time I simply must try to picture to myself what seems to be coming. Now supposing that, after the occupation of Paris and possibly of Lyons, the German Army Command were to let the French vote on the government they wanted. A lot would depend on how it was staged; the peasants and a section of the workers would certainly vote for Louis Napoleon again.

There is a new element present in politics that goes deep, and which former victors knew nothing of, or at least they made no conscious use of it. They try to humiliate the vanquished profoundly in his own eyes, so that he should never again really trust himself to achieve anything. It is possible that this aim will be achieved; but whether things will be any better and happier is another matter.

What a mistake the poor German nation will make if once home it tries to put its rifle in the corner and devote itself to the arts and the pleasures of peace! In point of fact, it will be a matter of military training before everything! And after a time, no one will be able to say what they are living for. Then we shall see

the Russo-German war in the middle of the picture, and then gradually in the foreground.

In the meanwhile, we can both thank Heaven that at least Alsace and Baden are not to be soldered together: it would have produced a fatal mixture. That has been rendered quite impossible owing to the fact that Baden troops were given an essential role in the siege of Strasburg. For I take the liberty of presuming that that was not arranged by mistake. One of two things must happen: Alsace will either become purely Prussian or it remains French. Precisely *because* German dominion in these new *Länder* is so difficult, it can only be administered directly by Prussia, and any intermediary form of guardianship or tutelage under the German Empire would not be feasible.

There is one other extraordinary sight to which the world will have to accustom itself: the Protestant House of Hohenzollern as the one effective protector of the Pope, who from now on becomes a subject of the Italian Kingdom.

But enough of politics! May heaven grant us a tolerably quiet interval. […]

II. To Friedrich von Preen, Basel, New Year's Eve, 1870

[Esteemed Sir and Friend!]

[…]

What has not happened in the last three months! Who could have believed that the struggle would have lasted far into a horrible winter, and would still show no sign of ending on the last day of the year?

I shall remember the end of this year my whole life long! And not as regards my own, private, fate. The two great intellectual peoples of the continent are in the process of completely sloughing their culture, and a quite enormous amount of all that delighted and interested a man before 1870 will hardly touch the man of 1871—but what a tremendous spectacle, if the new world is born in great suffering.

The change in the German spirit will be as great as in the French; at first the clergy of both confessions will look upon themselves as the heirs of the spiritual disintegration, but something quite different will soon make itself felt, to one side. The shares of the "Philosopher" will rise sharply, whereas Hegel, after this year's jubilee publications, may very possibly make his definitive jubilee retirement.

The worst of all this is not the present war, but the era of wars upon which we have entered, and to this the new mentality will have to adapt itself. […]

III. To Friedrich von Preen, Basel, April 26, 1872

[Esteemed Sir and Friend]

[…]

I am not being unfair. Bismarck has only taken into his own hands what would have happened in due course without him and in opposition to him. He saw the growing wave of social democracy would somehow or other bring about a state of naked power, whether through the democrats themselves, or through the Governments, and said: *Ipse faciam*, and embarked on three wars, 1864, 1866, 1870.

But we are only at the beginning. Don't you feel that everything we do now seems more or less amateurish, capricious, and becomes increasingly ridiculous by contrast with the high purposefulness of the military machine worked out to the last details? The latter is bound to become the model of existence. It will be most interesting for you, my dear Sir, to observe how the machinery of State and administration is transformed and militarized; for me—how schools and education are put through the

cure, etc. Of all classes, the workers are going to have the strangest time; I have a suspicion that, for the time being, sounds completely mad, and yet I cannot rid myself of it: that the military state will have to turn “industrialist.” The accumulations of beings, the mounds of men in the yards and factories cannot be left for all eternity in their need and thirst for riches; a planned and controlled degree of poverty, with promotion and uniforms, starting and ending daily to the roll of drums, that is what ought to come logically. (I know enough history, of course, to know that things do not always work out logically.) Of course, what is done will have to be well done and then no mercy, whether for those above or those below.

[…]

The development of a clever and lasting sovereign power is still in swaddling clothes; it may perhaps wear its *toga virilis* for the first time in Germany. There are still vast uncharted seas to be discovered in this sphere. The Prussian dynasty is so placed that it and its staff can never again be powerful enough. There can be no question of stopping on this path; the salvation of Germany itself is in forging ahead.

[…]

IV. To Friedrich von Preen, Basel, New Year’s Eve, 1872

[Esteemed Sir and Friend]

[…]

Admittedly, everything appears calm in the area of politics. But I believe that the masters in Berlin are very worried, not because of foreign countries but because of their completely misguided position toward the nation. One has allowed outer efforts on behalf of so-called freedom to come into existence, yet secretly one is determined to act according to his own will for all eternity. Not that I would deem an absolutist government a particular misfortune when compared with the consequences of universal suffrage; I have become rather cool toward such notions; but I fear a new war as the only diversion from domestic matters.

Source of English translations: Excerpts I–III were taken from Alexander Dru, ed. and trans., *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955, pp. 143–44, 145–46, 151–52, 156–57. Excerpt IV was translated by Erwin Fink.

Source of original German letters: Letters (I–IV) from Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) to Friedrich von Preen (1823–1894), September 17, 1870; December 31, 1870; April 26, 1872; and December 31, 1872, in Jacob Burckhardt, *Briefe*, edited by Max Burckhardt, 10 vols., vol. 5, 1868–1875. Basel: Schwabe and Co., 1963, pp. 110–12, 118–19, 159–61, 181–82.

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