

Ursula von Kardorff, Diary Entries about Attitudes on the Home Front (October-November, 1942)

Abstract

Ursula von Kardorff was a German journalist whose work concentrated mostly on arts and culture in Germany during the Third Reich. She remained active in arts journalism throughout the war, working at the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (DAZ)* in Berlin until March 1945, when she left her job to flee the advancing Russians. Von Kardorff was an opponent of the regime, and had known associations with members of the resistance, including Fritz-Dietlof von der Schulenburg, and as such was interrogated in connection with the 20 July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. She managed to convince the Gestapo she had no connection to the plot and was released. Her diaries, first published in 1962, describe her experiences living in Nazi Germany, as well as her growing discontent with the regime.

In this excerpt we see the willingness by late 1942 in some circles to debate the war's futility behind closed doors. Critical opinions are voiced despite the presence of an SS officer. These misgivings grew into increasing pessimism, which was to become especially pronounced following defeat at Stalingrad.

Source

31 October 1942 Family evening with Adelheid Veltheim and her younger brother, Josel. After eighteen months in a hospital, he is just able to get about on sticks, although the wound in his leg continues to suppurate. Klaus, Jürgen and Josel, to all appearances carefree young officers, are unable to reconcile the contrasts which exist between the fighting front and the home front. I wondered whether they were wrong to believe that in fighting Russia they are defending the Christian traditions and culture of the West. Klaus said, "We are fighting to preserve this country for you." Jürgen said, "Of course every Frenchman or Russian will defend his country when it is threatened—that's obvious." Josel said, "Yes, but don't you think that this country, for which so many have already given their lives, may be dead already? Might we not be fighting for ideals which no longer mean anything to people at home?" I said nothing. I could not bring myself to add to their worries. [...]

1 November 1942: On Saturday we had fifty people to the house and they stayed half the night. A wartime party. We merely provided the empty glasses and our guests brought plenty of bottles with them and saw to it that they were filled. Six badly wounded officers came—indeed the party was given for them. One had an arm amputated at the shoulder, another hobbled on crutches. Schwab-Felisch even managed to dance, although he has lost half of each foot from frostbite and has not yet got proper orthopedic boots.

It was a strange evening. Many of the guests did not feel like dancing and instead sat in my room and argued. This was not a very safe thing to do, because at the last minute Q., who is an SS-man and a journalist, turned up. I don't suppose he often hears people talk as frankly as they did that night in our house. Yesterday he told Mamma on the telephone that he had been horrified at so much defeatist talk. The most violent criticism came from the soldiers, and was mostly concerned with the Government's religious policy. Josel mentioned a place in Posen where all the churches had been closed down. "Aren't there two sides to an oath of allegiance?" he demanded. "Isn't the man to whom allegiance is sworn bound to keep his side of the bargain?" Somebody said, "We're all like rats on a sinking ship, the only difference being that we can't get off it any more." "You mean that it's like the Nibelungen?" Adelheid asked. Werner Haeften, a nephew of von Brauschitsch, who has been in the hospital for months with

severe wounds and who had to sit on an air cushion while he was with us, said ironically to Q., “The only thing we’d like to do with you is to put the lot of you on a desert island and make you listen to your own speeches over the loudspeaker from morning till night.”

Q. put up the best defense he could manage. He is supposed to be the ablest journalist the Nazis have. But in the end things got too tough for him. When Konrad Zweigert said, “You people make every possible effort to suppress the truth,” he got up and tried to leave. Klaus and I had some difficulty in smoothing him down. Conversations like that can be dangerous for all concerned, although admittedly wounded soldiers can afford to speak more frankly than other people.

The best part of the evening was before the guests arrived and I took turns in dancing with my brothers in the empty dining room.

Source of English translation: Ursula von Kardorff, *Diary of a Nightmare: Berlin, 1942-1945*. Translated from the German by Ewan Butler. New York: John Day, 1966, pp. 10-11.

Source of German original text: Ursula von Kardorff, *Berliner Aufzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1942 bis 1945*. 2. Aufl. München: Biederstein, 1962. pp. 8-10.

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