

Alfred Döblin on the German Population (1946)

Abstract

Writer Alfred Döblin left Germany in 1933, emigrating first to Switzerland, then to France (where he was granted citizenship in 1936), and finally to the U.S. In November 1945, he returned to Germany as an employee of the French occupation administration. He criticized the restorative tendencies in Germany and described his countrymen, after twelve years of Nazi dictatorship and war, as more depersonalized, more uniform, and more mentally sluggish than before. According to him, they hardly occupied themselves with the crimes of the Nazi regime and mistrusted Allied education on this topic. The occupation allowed them to see their poor living conditions not as the result of the war, but rather as the fault of the Allies. This was comparable, he suggested, to the situation just after World War I, when the country's political right wing saw the revolution not as the result of the German defeat, but rather as its cause, and discredited the revolution as the homeland's "stab in the back" of the army.

Source

[...]

These are the same people I left in 1933. But a great deal has happened to them. I see this in my daily contact with them. They have the same interests and forms of behavior they once had, the same appreciation of music, many of them are very learned. But on the whole they are less diverse, less individualistic than before. They appear more uniform, to me at least, coming as I do from the outside. Very few influences from the outside world reached them during those twelve years, and those that did were harshly controlled. They were subjected to systematic propaganda, an uninterrupted flood of official lies, and it leveled them, the educated and uneducated alike.

I got the impression, and I kept it throughout that entire initial period, that I had entered a house that was filled with smoke – but those living inside it noticed nothing at all.

New to me is a certain intellectual awkwardness, a heaviness. It's as though they have rusted somehow. A restricted repertory of ideas has been impressed upon them and they work with these ideas and it's hard to wean them away from them. That is the Nazi legacy. And that is why all the appeals made to them bounce off, and why the brochures written for their enlightenment have little effect and are read with disapproval and anger, as if Hitler were still running the country. And that is why you get nowhere with them on the topic of guilt. It is why they refuse to discuss politics with anyone of a different opinion. They are troubled, tormented, they want to be left in peace. That's understandable. But where do you go from there? Above all, you proceed rationally, without forcing it, by letting things happen, letting events run their course. The reports and the statistics on concentration camps and other horrors that are now being publicized can have an educational effect in themselves. But people are simply not inclined to believe them, for it is strangers, foreigners, as a rule, who are reporting this news. Seeing what happened to the cities might have the same effect. But they are under occupation now. To those adherents of the old regime, and there are many of them, of course, the occupation is a gift dropped right into their laps. It can be used as it was right after 1918, after the First World War, as the Revolution and the events that followed it were used as an obstacle to enlightenment, as the basis of a new legend of having been stabbed in the back. Now, during the occupation, as the effects of the war unfold – what could be easier than to blame the occupation for everything? That's how difficult the situation is.

When I think of the aftermath of the First World War, the upheavals of those years appear as lucid as a

fresco compared to the troubled picture of today. [...]

Source of English translation: Alfred Döblin, *Destiny's Journey*, edited by Edgar Pässler. Translated by Edna McCown. New York: Paragon House, 1992, pp. 284–85.

Source of original German text: Alfred Döblin, “Schicksalsreise,” in *Autobiographische Schriften und letzte Aufzeichnungen*. Olten: Walter-Verlag, 1980, p. 382f.

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