Hermann Hesse, Letter to a Young German (1946)

Abstract

In 1946, writer Hermann Hesse, who had been living in Switzerland since 1919, and who had been critical of National Socialism after 1933, lamented the lack of insight and the self-righteousness of his German countrymen. He faulted Germans for complaining about their material situation while remaining silent about their support for Hitler and for making themselves into members of the resistance after the fact. He also criticized his compatriots for looking down on those in exile like Thomas Mann, who had actively fought against the Third Reich.

Source

[*This letter, written in the spring of 1946, was meant for Luise Rinser. It appeared in numerous newspapers as an "Open Letter."*]

It's strange about letters from your country. For months a letter from Germany was a strange and always joyful event for me. It brought news that a friend I had been worried about, of whom I had long heard nothing, was still alive. And it gave me a glimpse, haphazard and unreliable as it might be, of the country which speaks my language, to which I have entrusted my life work, and which up to a few years ago gave me my bread and the moral justification for my work. Such letters always came as a surprise, were confined to matters of importance and contained no idle chatter; often they were written in great haste […].

Then the letters became more frequent and longer […]. Many of these gave me no pleasure at all and I had little desire to answer them. […]

A prisoner in France, no youngster but already a married man with children, a well-educated industrialist with a university degree, asked me what in my opinion a decent, well-intentioned man should have done in the Hitler period. A man in his position, he argued, could not have prevented anything that happened or opposed Hitler in any way; that would have been madness, it would have cost him his livelihood, his freedom, and in the end his life. I could only reply that the devastation of Russia and Poland, the siege of Stalingrad, and the lunacy of holding it to the bitter end must also have involved certain dangers but that German soldiers had flung themselves into these pursuits with abandon. And why had the German people failed to see through Hitler before 1933? Oughtn't so early an event as the Munich Putsch have shown them what he was? Why, instead of upholding and nurturing the German Republic, the one gratifying consequence of the First World War, had they been almost unanimous in sabotaging it, voting for Hindenburg and later for Hitler, under whom, to be sure, it became very dangerous to behave like a decent human being? […]

For instance, there are all the old acquaintances who had written to me for years but stopped when they found out that I was under close surveillance and that corresponding with me could have very unpleasant consequences. Now they inform me that they are still in the land of the living, that they have always thought of me with affection and envied my good fortune at living in the paradise of Switzerland, and that, as I must be well aware, they had never sympathized with those damned Nazis. But many of these old acquaintances were party members for years. Now they tell me how they had one foot in the concentration camp all those years, and I am obliged to reply that the only anti-Nazis I can take seriously are those who had both feet in a camp, not one in a camp and the other in the party. […]

Then there are the simple souls, former members of the Youth Movement, who write me that they joined the party about 1934 after a severe inner struggle, for no other purpose than to provide a salutary counterweight to the savage, brutal elements. And so on.

Others have private complexes. They live in utter misery, they have serious worries, and yet they find paper, ink, time and energy to write me long letters expressing their contempt for Thomas Mann and their indignation that I should be friends with such a man.

Another group consists of former colleagues and friends who openly and unreservedly supported Hitler's triumphal progress all through the years. Now they write me touchingly friendly letters, telling me all about their daily lives, their bomb damage and domestic cares, their children and grandchildren, as though nothing had happened, as though nothing had come between us, as though they had not helped to kill friends and relatives of my wife, who is Jewish, and to discredit and destroy my life work. Not one of them says that he repents, that he sees things in an entirely different light today, that he was deluded. And not one of them says that he was and intends to remain a Nazi, that he regrets nothing, that he stands by his guns. Find me a Nazi who has stood by his guns when things began to go wrong! These people are sickening!

A few of the letter writers expect me to switch my allegiance to Germany, to come back and help to reeducate the people. A good many more call on me to raise my voice in the outside world, to protest as a neutral and humanitarian against the commissions and omissions of the occupying powers. How can they be so naïve, so utterly ignorant of the world and the times, so touchingly, embarrassingly childish!

[…]

I have grown old and tired, and the destruction of my work […] has given my last years a ground bass of disillusionment and sorrow. […]

Among the good things which I am *still* able to enjoy, which still give me pleasure and compensate for the dark side, are the rare but undeniable indications that an authentic spiritual Germany lives on. I neither seek nor find them in the bustling of its present culture-manufacturers and fair-weather democrats but in such gratifying manifestations of determination, alertness, and courage, of good will and of confidence shorn of illusions, as your letter. I thank you for it. Preserve the seed, keep faith with the light and the spirit. There are very few of you, but you may be the salt of the earth.

Source of English translation: Hermann Hesse, *If the War Goes On…Reflections on War and Politics.* Translated by Ralph Manheim, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, pp. 159–67.

Source of original German text: Hermann Hesse, "Brief", *National-Zeitung Basel*, April 26, 1946; reprinted in Klaus Wagenbach, ed., *Vaterland, Muttersprache. Deutsche Schriftsteller und ihr Staat von 1945 bis heute*. Berlin: 1979, p. 51 ff.

Recommended Citation: Hermann Hesse, Letter to a Young German (1946), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4586> [September 12, 2026].