

Walther von Hollander on the Breakdown of Marriages, Separation, Divorce (1946)

Abstract

For most Germans, the immediate postwar period was marked by profound material hardship, which was often made worse by the breakdown of personal relationships, as evidenced by the spike in the divorce rate. While columnist and radio host Walter von Hollander felt that certain concrete reasons were largely to blame (economic hardship, for example, and inappropriate behavior by one partner during or after the war), he also pointed to far-reaching transformations in gender relationships – at home, men who had been demoralized by war defeat and whose traditional authority had been compromised encountered self-confident women who were ready to assume responsibility, who had proven themselves on the “home front,” and who were not able or willing to readily relinquish their new roles.

Source

For the most part, it is young people who are undone by the misery, but there are also plenty of older ones who, separated by the horrible *Völkerwanderung* [migration of peoples] or simply by the landslide of worldviews, are unable to find each other again. Very often the terrible housing situation is to blame, the material hopelessness. Often, with couples, the personal blame rests with one side or the other. The men’s behind-the-lines experiences, which they readily gloss over or which even prompt them to make insulting comparisons; wartime adventures by the wives that are not so easily forgiven. The mutual neglectfulness that easily arises from daily life. Sometimes two people are separated by an incomprehensible nothing. The result is the same: divorce or the desire for a divorce.

The question of whether these marital failures point to a general marriage crisis is not easy to answer unequivocally. Since the turn of the century, there has been repeated talk about a general marriage crisis; the complete downfall of marriage has been prophesied, and with it – indeed, brought on by it – the decline of the West. In my 1940 book on marriage *Das Leben zu Zweien* [*Life Together*], I examined this question on the basis of a large amount of factual data, and I reached the conclusion that the existing marriage crisis did not actually trigger, or even reinforce, the general crisis of the West; rather, it is merely one manifestation of a general cultural crisis. To put it differently: in times of transition, marriage is invariably also in transition; in chaotic times, marriage, too, will become chaotic. In marriage, as the central institution of life, even peripheral disturbances register as strong seismographic waves. At the time, I identified the following as the main cause of the marriage crisis: women’s new stance toward life and in life (that is, in a job), which should correspond to a new place in marriage, and a new stance toward sexuality as something that is necessary to life and blessed, and as something that can no longer be captured by the notion of sin.

These theses generally hold true for the current situation as well. In some cases, their applicability is even more intense. During the war, women proved themselves splendidly in a male world threatened by death and in a male world of work. Oftentimes, and only the willfully blind can deny this, they led a kind of sexual life that, rightly or wrongly, had previously been reserved for men. Now there are countless women, perhaps even the majority, who would only too happily return the burden of male life to the man, but who aren’t all equally willing to relinquish the pleasures of the male life, its relative freedom. The second intensifying factor: men and women have gone through almost the same dangers. The returning soldier could usually demand forbearance and consideration. But now, who shall be kind to whom? Everyone is demanding from the other person the strength to overcome nearly insurmountable

difficulties? Third intensifying factor: men fought the war and lost it. Their pride has been hurt by the defeat. But as a wise female physician observed, they returned not infrequently with the look of winners. "Women," the physician said, "entrusted their lives to the men, and even trustingly followed them into the war, which they rejected internally. The women knew a long time ago that the war was lost. But the men assured them that they would still win it. Now, after the defeat, they cannot demand that we continue to entrust ourselves to their leadership." A bitter, not very objective word. But it reflects the mood among wide circles of women. It shows why men won't simply be given back the say in marriage. The woman has learned to bear responsibility. One will be able to take responsibility from her only when that person does in fact have the strength to lead. In those cases, women would happily and easily entrust themselves again.

There is another very bitter truth, about which it is difficult to speak but pointless to remain silent. It is not only that the German man is coming home defeated. The victors have arrived with him, and he is forced to realize that a small, not very valuable portion of the women are falling for the victors. It is nearly impossible to render an objective judgment on this. Still, the German soldier, given his war experience, would have to admit that this is just the way it has been, and is, all over the world. Or would he wish that the women who pleased him in foreign lands suffer the revenge of their countrymen? Surely not. But for the sake of the dignity of the defeated, he naturally desires that all German women maintain the necessary moral distance. And towards those who violate it he feels contempt mixed with hatred, which is entirely understandable in those cases where women yield to the victors for the sake of small material benefits.

Source: Walther von Hollander on the Breakdown of Marriages, Separation, Divorce (1946), in *Von den Toren der Wirklichkeit. Deutschland 1946–47 im Spiegel der Nordwestdeutschen Hefte*. Selected and introduced by Charles Schüddekopf. Berlin, Bonn, 1980, p. 315f; reprinted in Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945–1963*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1988, pp. 35–37.

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