

Friedrich Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe: Reflections and Recollections* (1946)

Abstract

Here, the historian Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1964) reflects on the “Spirit of 1914,” a transient sense of unity felt by Germans during the initial stages of the First World War. Free from romantic notions of national solidarity, Meinecke also addresses the fissures in German society that reasserted themselves several months after the war began.

Source

III. THE GERMAN PEOPLE DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

When the First World War broke out, it seemed once more that a kind angel might lead the German people back to the right path. The exaltation of spirit experienced during the August days of 1914, in spite of its ephemeral character, is one of the more precious, unforgettable memories of the highest sort. All the rifts which had hitherto existed in the German people, both within the bourgeoisie and between the bourgeoisie and the working classes, were suddenly closed in the face of the common danger which snatched us out of the security of the material prosperity that we had been enjoying. And more than that, one perceived in all camps that it was not a matter merely of the unity of a gain-seeking partnership, but that an inner renovation of our whole state and culture was needed. We generally believed indeed that this had already commenced and that it would progress further in the common experiences of the war, which was looked upon as a war of defense and self-protection. We underwent a rare disappointment in our hopes. Within a year the unity was shattered and the German people were again separated upon various paths. Was the uplift of August 1914 after all merely the last flickering of older evolutionary forces which were now coming to an end? A good observer, Max Hildebert Böhm, suspected as much in 1917. He wrote in the *Preussische Jahrbücher* (volume 167): “In many respects August 1914 will perhaps at a later time look much less like the commencement of a new era than the rather painful farewell to an old one, the splendid final harmonious note of a romanticism from which the German mind could tear itself away only with profound resignation.” The new era that is now really approaching, he continued, will be characterized by techniques, rationalism, bread-rationing socialism, by a pitiless ethos guided not by the heart but by the head. A state whose essence is organization will be indifferent, with the innermost distrust, toward the incalculable unfolding of life of the individual, from which alone German culture buds forth.”

These words like a searchlight throw their beam both backward and forward. We stand at the main turning-point in the evolution of the German people. The man of Goethe’s day was a man of free individuality. He was at the same time a “humane” man, who recognized his duty toward the community to be “noble, helpful, and good” and carried out his duty accordingly. He lived and developed at first in the synthesis of classical liberalism and then of the national socialism of the Naumann stamp. He became ever more strongly bound up with the social needs of the masses and with the political requirements of the state; that is, he became ever more tightly and concretely united with the community of people and state that enveloped him. Once more something of this old free relationship between the individual and the state glowed in the romanticism of the August days. Was the “humane” man, who then once again bore testimony to himself, henceforth to be condemned to extinction by all the forces which were compressing men more and more in masses? We shall keep this difficult question in mind; the answer to it can be found, so far as is possible at all, at the end.

As early as 1915 one could perceive that the August synthesis of cultural and social forces would not last. It crumbled away simultaneously from both the right and the left. The efforts of the extreme left, associated with the name of the younger Liebknecht, belong to the history of communism in Germany. Communism was developing and would become of historical significance if Germans of the future should take their stamp from it. The developments on the German right wing which must now occupy us were not yet, however, touched by communism.

The conflict about war aims broke out at this point. For Germany's future the important thing to be done now was for Germany to extricate herself from the mortally dangerous position into which she had fallen through her thoughtless prewar policy. She made enemies simultaneously of the two great world powers, Russia and England. [...]

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