

WHO IS GUILTY—THE GERMANS OR THEIR GOVERNMENT?

WILLIAM EBENSTEIN

A GALLUP poll earlier this year sought to ascertain whether, in the opinion of the American public, our principal enemy in this war is the German people or the German government. Six per cent of those questioned stated that it is the German people, seventy-four per cent the German government, eighteen per cent looked upon both government and people as our main enemy, and only two per cent had no opinion in the matter.

It may be assumed that only very few of those who see in the German government the main enemy, thus absolving the German people from the guilt for all that has been committed in the name of Germany in the last ten years, have come to this conclusion through first-hand observation of Germany, or even through a study of German history and civilization. With the American environment as the sole guide, it is virtually impossible to understand how the German thinks, and how he normally reacts.

Let us take the problem of militarism as an illustration. I have been struck by the almost complete unanimity with which German writers—regardless of their political *credo*—have agreed that the army is the basis of German society and politics. The only divergence among German writers and observers is this: the historically predominant school of thought accepts the militaristic pattern with delight, whereas the historically less influential school in Germany has tried, in vain so far, to struggle against it. Strange as it may seem, the only people who deny the existence of that militarism in Germany are well-meaning English and American writers. Frenchmen, Czechs, Poles, Norwegians, Danes, Hollanders, Belgians, Greeks and Yugoslavs do not need any literary instruction on that subject.

There are two main reasons why English and American writers do not understand, and therefore often deny, the existence of that all-pervading militarism in Germany. First, a large land-based military establishment is alien to England and the United States, two countries that traditionally think and act in terms of sea power. Second, neither country has ever made the acquaintance of German militarism through first-hand experience such as

the European continent is now acquiring. Incidentally, the fact that France and Russia were invaded by Germany in this war, but not England and the United States, will be one of the trump cards of German diplomacy at the coming peace conference.

Militarism has little to do with the size of the military establishment of a country. Thus, France was less militaristic than Germany in the nineteen twenties, although the former was more and better armed than the latter. A nation is *militaristic* when the *civilian elements* acknowledge, and submit to, the military group as the political and social ruling class. Every group has the tendency toward what might be termed *professional imperialism*. Thus, business men believe that what a country needs is good government—which is, of course, government run on business principles, and preferably by business men. Labor has similar ideas about society as a whole. The greatest philosopher of all, Plato, was convinced that the true commonwealth would come into being only when the philosophers would be kings, and the kings philosophers.

That the German military classes have sought to dominate German society and politics is not extraordinary. But that the German people, more than any other nation with the possible exception of Japan, should have docilely submitted to that claim is an event which transcends the boundaries of Germany. Early in 1932 General Groener publicly stated that all throughout the Weimar Republic no major political decision could be taken in Germany without the consent of the Reichswehr.

An argument that one often hears in discussing the problem of German guilt is that, as Burke said with regard to France, one cannot indict a whole nation. This thesis is neither universally true nor universally false. Whether it is true or false depends, empirically, on time and space. In the eighteenth century it was, on the whole, more applicable than today. Politics then was the exclusive province of monarchs or other authoritarian rulers, and the people had little or nothing to say about the conduct of their irresponsible leaders. The monarch, and he alone, was responsible for national conduct. Illiteracy, social enslavement, and cultural apathy contributed to create a situation in which the masses were but so much material power used by the rulers in their dynastic and imperial struggles. This general pattern of the eighteenth century is still prevalent in many parts of the world. Thus, most Latin American countries today are on a cultural and economic level which, if anything, is

lower than that of the European masses in the eighteenth century. Likewise, it would be foolish to speak of the political and moral responsibility of the people in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, or Abyssinia.

But the world has changed in many parts since Burke uttered his noble warning against collective indictments. Germany has not had, in the past hundred and fifty years, the maturing political experience of Western Europe and North America. Yet it would certainly be a gross exaggeration to put the German people on the same level of political experience as Afghanistan, Bolivia or Guatemala. From 1870 to 1914, and again from 1919 to 1933, the German people have had the opportunity of choosing for themselves a régime of freedom and peace, or one of authoritarianism and war. Both times, the Germans freely decided for the latter rather than for the former. Bismarck and his openly announced policy of blood and iron were repeatedly approved in free elections by the vast majority of the German people. In 1914, the German socialists supported the war. It is often urged that this proves nothing, as the French and Belgian socialists also supported the war. The difference, however, consisted in this: the German socialists supported their government in acts of admitted invasion, aggression and violation of treaties (according to Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg the latter were in any case but *Fetzen Papier*), whereas the French and Belgian socialists defended their ravaged lands with their blood. This attitude of the German socialists continued even after the first world war. They persisted in looking upon the war as a purely imperialistic affair in which the invaded democracies of France and Belgium had the same moral status as the aggressive Germany of the Hohenzollerns.

Later, after 1919, the Germans had again a free opportunity to choose one kind of political system rather than another. The conscious and unconscious propagandists of the German cause in the United Nations claim that we cannot blame the German people for having adopted Nazism, as it is a world-wide disease that knows of no political or national boundaries. What they conveniently do not mention is that *Germany is the only country in the world in which Nazism was voted into power*. Whether we look at Belgium, Holland, France, the Scandinavian countries, England, or the United States, we are impressed by the momentous fact that in none of these countries did Fascist or Nazi groups ever achieve more than one, two or three per cent of

the total vote. This is truly one of the cases where a difference of quantity becomes one of quality.

Well-meaning liberals and deliberate confusionists do not tire in emphasizing that if Germany has her Hitler, England has her Mosley, and the United States her Fritz Kuhn. However, this similarity conceals an ever greater dissimilarity. In Germany, Schiecklgruber is the great national idol, whereas in England Mosley has been interned for the duration of the war as the Number One potential traitor and saboteur, and in our own country Fritz Kuhn is serving time for the not very heroic offence of larceny. It is quite true that both we and Germany have an underworld of gangsters. What distinguishes the two countries is that in the United States the decent people send the gangsters to prison, whereas in Germany the gangsters are the government, law-makers and jail wardens.

In the last war the German people were often defended on the ground that even if they wanted to overthrow Kaiserism they could not do so in the face of overwhelming official force and pressure. Yet when the German people realized, in the fall of 1918, that they had no chance to win the war they ousted the Hohenzollern régime. All the *Ordnung* and *Disziplin* of a model military dictatorship was of no avail. As long as the Allies appealed to the German people on the basis of democracy and humanitarianism, they paid little attention to this propaganda.

The same thing will, of course, be repeated in this war. As long as the Germans believe that they have a chance to win this war, Allied propaganda based on the *Four Freedoms* and the *Atlantic Charter* will prove of little practical value. However, as soon as the Germans will convince themselves that the war is lost, no Gestapo and concentration camps will stop them from giving up the struggle. This will prove that the German people can overthrow the Nazi régime if they really want to. Unfortunately, it will also prove again that the Germans will do that only when they know they have lost the war, and not because Nazism is the scourge of the world. As late as June, 1918, Gustav Stresemann ridiculed in the German Reichstag Polish demands for national independence in a manner which would do honor to Ribbentrop or Hitler. The Stresemanns in Germany are not converted to international justice when defeat is imminent, but only when it is consummated.

There is sufficient evidence for the fact that Nazism is nowhere as secure and free from interference as in Germany.

Here again, the question is not whether there is anti-Nazi resistance in Germany, but *how much*. For every German Niemoeller there are twenty Norwegian martyrs. For every German anti-Nazi Catholic priest there are dozens of Belgian Church victims and hundreds of Polish martyred priests. For every act of anti-Nazi sabotage in Germany there are uncounted acts of sabotage in Nazi-occupied Europe. If the Heydrichs are killed, they are not killed by their fellow-countrymen, but by heroic underground groups of Czechs. There is literally hardly a day in which we do not receive news that this or that Belgian, Dutch, or French Nazi leader has been liquidated by patriots who risk their lives on such missions. Where are the German patriots who put an end to their Nazi criminals?

If the United Nations have shown an attitude toward Fascist Italy different from that shown toward Nazi Germany, this difference is not based on alleged qualities of a non-existent Italian race, but on a solid fact. When Fascism came to power in 1922 by a putsch, its voting strength in the country was about fifteen per cent of the electorate. Unlike Nazism, Fascism had to seize power by force. It is the well considered view of informed observers of Fascist Italy that Italian Fascism, like the authoritarian régimes in Spain and Hungary, was never more than a bureaucratic system based, essentially, on the army and civil service. Germany has the distinction of being the one country in the world in which Nazism has been a *genuine mass movement*.

The problem of the Allies with regard to Germany's European satellites is the destruction of bureaucratic and terroristic machines. This will be easy. The formidable task in Germany will be to destroy a mentality. This is a different, and more difficult, problem.