

On the Theme of “War Guilt”*

(Zum Thema der „Kriegsschuld“)
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By Max Weber

(Translated by Peter Mentzel** and Hans Eicholz***)

The consummate wretchedness of the past two months has surpassed anything that German history has had to offer. The ear of the world has been won by all sorts of literati, who have satisfied their need of dealing with the crushing fearsomeness of the war, and their over-stimulated souls, by wallowing in the feeling of “war guilt.” Such a defeat must have been the result of some kind of “guilt” – only then could it make sense in that “world order,” which all such weak and immature natures, who have not grown up to face reality, must endure. But now the world is arranged otherwise than they would like to believe. “The God of Battles is with the larger battalions,” was Frederick the Great’s literary reflection, and it was not valid for this four year long war. But it turned out to be, in this case, the final result. Yet insofar as it rejects the undignified idea that a war’s end reflects a divine judgement, it successfully refutes it. Military success proves absolutely nothing either for or against Justice, and this observation is valid for all time, as the countless corpse-fields of history can prove even to the stupidest person.

If this argument were only meant to protect our soldiers from the accusation that they were inferior after all, whatever their masculine and austere view of life, one could leave it to them to shake off such accusations. But the political danger for the whole future of the relations of our nation to all other nations is based on this vile and fake appearance. This is what the world sees instead of the opinion of that silent Germany, which, however will soon right itself when the bustling of the current amateurish regime will have come to an end. In the name of honesty, the world must be informed, far across the lands and seas: It is not true; these literati are not Germany and

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their behavior does not correspond to the real attitude of the Germans to their own war-fate.

The author of this article, out of purely political as well as general cultural grounds, stood before the war for a decent understanding with England that would have made war impossible, and he has not changed his attitude. He had no time to respond or go along with the foolish ideas about American war-motives and the notions of President Wilson. It never occurred to him to see the German invasion of Belgium as a harmless event and to regard the plans to annex that country as anything other than madness. He also does not think differently than before about the serious failures of judgement, above all the frequently careless irresponsibility of the callous parvenu loudmouths in the time of Wilhelm II. Of course, he should not claim to be considered more than any other person is to be considered: to speak in the name of those Germans who think as well as he does. But if he does not join the collective explanation of his Heidelberg colleagues about the war guilt debate, because all academic explanations about war lack credibility, he reserves for himself the right to hold the same viewpoint as those explanations.

But first a few other remarks.

The judgement of History regarding how President Wilson lived up to his unprecedented responsibility will ultimately be determined by his behavior. If, in the face of all this, he really should not hesitate to sit down alone with our opponents, after exposing himself alone to their efforts to influence his judgment, without, in any way, considering the German representatives whose hands are clean even though they have been defeated, such a situation can lead to grave consequences, above all for the domestic and foreign attitudes of the German population toward the coming peace. At least this much has been noticed: Saarbrücken, Bozen, Reichenberg, Danzig, and other areas are played away into the hands of foreign nations, German rivers and canals are taken away from our disposition under a so-called “neutralization,” forced labor and pawned possessions as claims against damages, which are clearly the consequences of the war – all this would, of course, lead to the fact that even the politically most radical worker in Germany – not now, but after a year and a day, when the present dizziness and the subsequent exhaustion are over – would become a chauvinist! And together with the intellectual layers of the nation would recall those revolutionary meanings of self-determination, as it has been with every irredenta, and how a people 70 million strong could use these ideas more extensively and more vigorously than Serbia or even Italy ever did. Only children and fools can hope, by these means and ways (as now a handful of fanatics with their attendant hunters of loot want) to found a new economic order or to make the present conditions “ripe” for “socialization.” But in contrast to a foreign political and military power, based on previous experience, things stand completely differently. Naturally every German capable of judgement knows that for the enemies of the moment it would be a simple matter to occupy any important places in Germany and that they could make a speedy end of the current so-called revolutionary activities; small, but well-armed fanatics

and bandits, in case they considered it necessary on some grounds to be in their interests. And, of course, it is conceivable that this threat will occur at some point, and sure that the opponents will then be forced to go further and further from the initially envisaged limited areas. No German government today would have the effective physical or moral power to oppose such an expedition. But the chances of organizing a longer-term mortgage of property would be completely different. However, it is not for us and the civilized world to further discuss the prospects of a forced peace – the "guilt of the future" – rather, the "guilt" of the past, especially for the war, will direct our deliberations.

At a time when it is attempted to solve such a problem by means of the publication of files (and one-sided at that!) on the immediate cause of the outbreak, it seems necessary to emphasize the childishness of such a beginning. He for whom the New Year's speech of Napoleon and the following actions of the diplomacy of 1859, or the diplomatic action of Austria in the Bundestag of 1866, or the Ems Telegram of 1870, or the ultimatum to Serbia of 1914 represents the reason for the war in question is simply a moron. Piedmont's efforts to unite Italy and Austria's resistance against it, Prussia's efforts to unify the small German states and the opposition to it, first by Austria and then France (the whole nation, from Napoleon to Thiers and Gambetta) were the foundations of the wars in 1859, 1866 and 1870. But while those diplomatic actions were not unimportant for the political results, for the emergence of the war itself, they were merely the indifferent forms by which it unfolded.

In the particular case of this war there is one, and only one power that desired it absolutely under all circumstances through its own will and required it according to its political goals: Russia. That is Tsarism, as a system, and those who hung onto it, or even more those known social strata who sufficiently pushed a personally indifferent tsar to war. The war came "like a natural event," a cadet told me, not long before the outbreak. And this belief – or rather, this conviction – went much further on the left. The historically grounded characteristic of Russian literati of all parties, who were not content to set their own domestic Russian affairs in order, but rather wanted to play a world role, came to light in the revolution of 1905 and have remained the same ever since. In 1914, in Russia, there was no social class of any influence which did not want the war. Thus, after the falling-out between Germany and England, Germany could have avoided the war with Russia only temporarily and only on the condition of giving up all lands of West Slavs and its own independence to Petersburg and Moscow's absolute rule. Anyone who has ever dealt with the administrative system of tsarism knows that there was nothing in the whole world that equals its refined methods of national emasculation, and that the revolution of 1905 brought about a change only in favor of people of an unpolitical nature or with a great deal of money. He would also know – and on 4 August 1914 German Social Democrats knew it too – that a war against this system was a good war, and that the achievements of German military leaders, which brought about its collapse, would always belong to the glorious pages of German history. In relation to Russia whose conduct was decisive for the war as

such, there was no German “war guilt” whatsoever. A discussion about guilt is only possible with our Western opponents.¹

Moreover, as far as the course of the outbreak against Russia is concerned, Article 1 of a Statute for an International Law of War of the League of Nations would have to declare: “A state that mobilizes for war while negotiations are continuing, shall fall into international disrepute.”² It was not only known to every statesman in the world, but to every politically interested layman, that and why a Russian mobilization not only made the war “inevitable,” but was itself the beginning of the war.

Article 2 of the National War Statute of the League of Nations statutes would declare: “A state that at the outbreak of a war does not clearly declare whether it will remain neutral shall fall into international disrepute.”³ This is how France behaved. Since France had pledged her honor in maintaining the existing alliance with Russia, she was now prohibited from appearing in the role of the unexpectedly overtaken. It is a little different, of course, if you ask about the ultimate reasons of war. The world had not been so judgmental about the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in 1870, and even shortly before the war, as during the war. However, this is irrelevant. For it does not change the fact that our dynastic policy led to a political treatment of Alsace which kept this wound open. (Before the war, in fact, the elevation of Alsace to the status of an equal German state was the demand of the French Social Democrats!) But of course that was not the decisive factor either, but rather it was the historic wish of French policy to have a weak neighbor instead of the strong one. This desire became definitive and, it must be said, was quite understandably fostered in its course beyond its original objective by the German government’s foolish and anxious Moroccan policy. The very sincerely meant attitude of Chancellor von Bethmann in the last years before the war came too late. But it cannot possibly be denied that, in contrast to Germany, a very strong popular movement in France, working towards a Franco-German war as such, has always existed and counteracted any honest attempts to reach an understanding. The small pamphlets and illustrated magazines spread throughout the country alone already served this mood in a way that would have been completely unworkable in Germany. In Germany the desire for an understanding was always popular. The demand for annexation, which was raised only during the course of the war, and which was held rather strongly just under the surface by German heavy industry interests, was consistently and overwhelmingly rejected by the vast majority of parliamentarians as well as by the nation. About a year before the outbreak of the war, a colleague from a large French newspaper sat with us and, after having given recommendations to German politicians, voiced concern that the impending threat of

¹ This paragraph’s translation from Zbigniew Mazur, 2017, “Max Weber and Germany’s Defeat of 1918,” *Przegląd Zachodni* I/2017, 7–29, 17.

² Translation of this sentence from Karl Palonen, 2017, “Rethinking the Westphalian Order During WWI: Max Weber on the Timeliness of the European Polity,” *Journal of Autonomy and Security Studies* 1 (2), 126–42, 135.

³ Translation of this sentence from Palonen (2017, 135).

war might lead to an unfriendly reception for him. We told him that in every German house the men who will have to go to the battlefield (if that turns out to be unavoidable) will shake your hand at parting and say: “Until we meet again on the field of honor.” After his behavior, I must assume that he, and not only he, understood this attitude. But we cannot expect this from France today. Discussions of “guilt questions,” given the present state of public opinion there, it seems, are pointless.

Article 3 of the National War Statutes of the future, in my opinion, would have to declare: “A permanently neutral state can appeal to its neutrality only if it is able to protect itself effectively and equally in every direction.”⁴ In contrast to Switzerland and Holland it was the political failure of Belgium not to have done this. Protections were directed only at Germany, the sea coast as well as the French border were completely unprotected. The German view on this was not hidden from the public: the express reference of the Kaiser to the Swiss maneuvers on the “uncovered other flank” was as clear as possible. This, of course, does not change the fact that the wrath of the surprised masses of the Belgian people is understandable to us. Even less so is the statement by Chancellor von Bethmann’s well-known speech at the beginning of the war to be devalued. But we must state that this “question of guilt” is not as simple as it is supposed to be.

Article 4 of the International Laws on War would have to declare, from a German perspective: “A neutral state that tolerates one party’s war crimes without recourse to violent defense, may not resort to violence against the other side by appealing to its illegal counter-measures, although they are judged to be the only means to meet the consequences of the enemy’s break of law.”⁵ For this was Germany’s legal stance in the submarine question, while President Wilson advocated his well-known principle that responsibility was “not connected, but separate.” But even if, as the President has repeatedly stated, the English blockade was never effective in the Baltic, the claiming of three-quarters of a million lives was obviously unlawful. From his legal point of view, however, he quite naturally drew the conclusion that he could and must treat only material damage from the other side formally separately from the threat posed to human life, by the other. The consequence of the German defeat is the victory of the legal interpretation of the president. But it would be wrong, in my opinion, to say that Germany entered the war purely arbitrarily and dishonestly, even if we accept that her aims were effectively impractical and thus, in a legal sense, objectively false.

The very serious individual mistakes of German policy towards America and above all the behavior of Herr Zimmermann in January 1917 cannot be justified in any way, and it must be frankly admitted that this incident made Germany’s ability to maintain trustworthy relationships with neutral powers, especially in delicate situations, extremely difficult. The attitude of Germany is mainly due to the idea that America intended to intervene in the war in any case. The idea was obviously

⁴ Translation of this sentence from Palonen (2017, 135).

⁵ Translation of this sentence from Palonen (*ibid.*, 136).

completely wrong. That this idea could emerge at all had its basis in the fact that in Germany there was the belief that there was a “war ideology” in America. In my opinion, this had nothing to do with “the almighty dollar.” On the contrary, those who were most inclined toward this idea were very different and no doubt part of the best social classes of “young” America. Above all, it found its carriers, as usual, within the inexorably steadily increasing ranks of university students. A prime example of such a view was to be found in 1904 in a solid and, and for this group, quite characteristic book, Thorsten Veblen’s *Theory of Business Enterprise*. It concluded with unconcealed joy that the time is drawing near in which world trade through war would be a rational business (a “sound business view” [Weber uses this term in English – Trans.]), and that this would reawaken the martial spirit, thereby replacing mere money-grubbing with dignity. And one could believe such if he followed closely the slow passage of this spirit among these strata (for example, in the dormitories of American Quaker Universities where students have German swords hanging from their walls, notably among those drawn to these chivalric sports), and occasionally among faculty colleagues regarding the reasonableness of a three-tiered form of class suffrage, and others who babble on about the phenomena of increasing aristocratization. Among other sporting-good reasons, such a Europeanized youth could hardly lack sympathy for an honorable contest with one the world’s great military powers. However, among the masses it was ultimately the subjectively quite honest conviction of the absolute wickedness of the German cause (Belgium!), the devious stubbornness of German diplomacy, and the recklessness of the German methods of warfare, which created a mood of war. It cannot, as I said, be denied in any way that all sorts of individual incidents and the behavior of various German functionaries helped to nourish this belief. On the other hand, of course, the information the Americans had remained so unilaterally one-sided, even today, that there could be absolutely no question of the possibility of conversation due to the lack of a reasonably fair standpoint among them. Unfortunately, their basic judgment about the reliability of our management was well founded. Only this had nothing to do with moral defects, but was based on a system of government which, under monarchical forms, yielded to the determination of irresponsible political decisions and the demagoguery of other creatures, which eventually became stronger than their masters. But the fight against this system had, among other things, been made exceptionally difficult due to the usually excessive praise which a part of the English press and literature used to lavish on the person of the German Kaiser.

And with this to England. The conversation about the “politics of encirclement” and “commercial envy” on our side, and the highly disagreeable pharisaical, priest-ridden lofty attitude of a part of the politicians there, overwhelmed the simple facts. Certainly, on the one hand, the completely wrong-headed staging of the German policy regarding the Boers (and other similar policies), and on the other hand, the ungenerous behavior of English policy against us in colonial matters had a strong impact. But a more effective reason for the war in terms of English policy was entirely due to the uncertainty about the aims and intended scope of the German naval construction.

In the face of many remarks by the Kaiser, the German naval strategy would seem to have led to the concentration of the English fleet in its home-waters, and thus to a paralysis of English world politics. Our experience in a war against all fleets of the earth together has taught us that for defense purposes a battle fleet of about the size of the French would have been sufficient for us. Considering the geographical location of Liverpool on the one hand, and Hamburg, on the other, a fleet of the full strength of the English would not have sufficed for a real blockade of England. Here lie, as a matter of fact, serious errors of Tirpitz's over-ambitious policies which we struggled against, and which have led to the fact that we must now say of the much talked about Anglo-Saxon world domination, what in 1871 Thiers said of German unity: "Ah, c'est nous qui l'avons faite!"

For what threatens us now, broad circles in Germany (especially some leading politicians and part of the press) will blame, no matter with what right, the attitude of England. In the case of a forceful Polish-Czech policy of the Entente against us, or by the imposition of some kind of serfdom, public opinion in Germany will probably seek its orientation in the wider East, where in the course of a few decades with the resurgence of Russia the situation will be the same as previously. It is not our job to teach English politicians that, after a victory over a people that after all cannot be dismissed, there are things in the behavior of a victor that will be extremely difficult for him, and others that will never be forgotten about him. Rather, in order not to discredit German sincerity, it should rather be said quite frankly how the faithful and upright circles of Germany bring a straightforward understanding to their factual discussions of "guilt." This has been said without regard to any promise of "success," but merely to set forth the moral basis of these potential attitudes in the future.

As for the opponents, peace will be made either by practical politicians, or by plebians, too small to defeat a great people, who will anoint a disgusting priesthood in the service of political and economic profit. In the latter case, the result is of little interest to us, and it means for us: keep silent and wait.