



The Road to Catastrophe

**Review of Hans Kohn, *The Mind of Germany*, and
G. P. Gooch, *French Profiles: Prophets and Pioneers***

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The Road to Catastrophe

Review of Hans Kohn, *The Mind of Germany* (New York, [1960]: Scribner; London, 1961: Macmillan), and G. P. Gooch, *French Profiles: Prophets and Pioneers* (London, 1961: Longman), *The Times Literary Supplement*, 30 March 1962, 216. Corrections incorporated from letter of 20 April 1962, 265.



Leo Baeck Institute

THE HISTORY OF IDEAS is not a field of study greatly favoured in British universities, and of all the elements in the Marxist outlook that have become domesticated in the British Isles, scepticism about the influence of ideas is probably more widespread than any other among English thinkers today Nor is

this surprising in a country so little dominated by individual thinkers and prophets. The doctrines of Locke and even those of Burke made their greatest impact outside England; no single thinker has played in England a part comparable to that of Voltaire or Rousseau in France, or of Croce in Italy, or of the radicals and Slavophiles in Russia. But the most conspicuous case of the tyranny of ideas is that of Germany, the modern history of which is scarcely intelligible apart from the great ideological spellbinders – Herder and Kant, Schiller and Goethe, Hegel and Fichte, Arndt and Jahn, Treitschke and Droysen, Wagner and Nietzsche and their descendants in the twentieth century.

Professor Kohn's book *The Mind of Germany* is a timely reminder of something that seems to be a recurrent factor in German history, the passion for collective self-assertion in the name of irrational ideas, and more particularly a tendency to the messianic faith in the leader, *der heimliche Kaiser*,¹ Frederick Barbarossa, asleep beneath the mountain who one day will awaken to lead his people out of bondage to conquer the world for ever. After the Hohenstauffens the Hohenzollerns and Hitler: each of these attempts rose to a climax and then collapsed in disaster and ignominy.

Professor Kohn is too just and intelligent a historian to seek the explanation in circular definitions of national character or metaphysical notions like innate peculiarities or the unique mission of a race or a culture. And if at least two factors that played a crucial part in the formation of National Socialism come from beyond the frontier – the 'monolithic' party in arms as it was realised in Russia or Italy and the theories of racial superiority that originated in France – these conceptions could never have seized upon an imagination that was not in some sense ready to receive them.

In the best pages of this highly informative book Professor Kohn traces the rise of the new spirit of self-absorbed separatism, which threatened, attacked and finally broke the dominion of the ancient European establishment that rested on the recognition of

¹ ['The secret Emperor']

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one universal, unalterable eternal, rationally intelligible pattern, a hierarchy in which all men and groups could discover their proper place and function and purpose. This central notion, which had sustained the Western world since the Greeks, rested on three fundamental presuppositions: that all questions both of theory and of practice were in principle capable of being objectively answered; that men were endowed with a specific faculty – reason or intuition or the power of interpreting the revealed word of God – which enabled them to live in the light of such objective answers as they could obtain; and that these objective solutions formed one universal harmonious whole, the perfect society, the golden age, which some placed in the mythical past, others in an equally mythical future.

The three pillars upon which this tradition rested were in due course eroded or destroyed: the ancient enemies, relativism and subjectivism, broke in. The belief that answers valid in one time or place or situation were necessarily valid for all others was first doubted, then denied. The Romantic movement went further and questioned the assumption that all valid answers were compatible with one another: for was it not possible that some equally valid values were in principle irreconcilable? That there were no objective universal criteria of rational choice? Had not Montesquieu already observed that when Montezuma said that Christianity might be right for the Spaniards, but that the **[b]** Aztec religion was best for the Aztecs, what he said was not untrue?

Such relativism was subversive enough of objective knowledge to cause equal scandal to Christians and dogmatic materialists: but even worse was to come. The boldest among the German Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling, Stirner – said or implied that the answers to questions of value were altogether unlike answers to questions of fact: not because they were subjective or uncertain but because they did not state facts at all, but proposed ideals, embodied inventions, not discoveries – goals created by individuals or generated by the collective imagination of races, nations, Churches – systems of values neither comparable with one another nor capable of being judged in terms of some overarching

standard common to them all. Novalis, Kreuzer, Hegel proclaimed the state to be a work of art; not an order sought after by reason, nor a device for preserving peace or allowing for the development of individuals, but a pattern freely created, embodied in the visions of great political masters, Alexander or Caesar or Napoleon, for whom human beings were as colours are for painters or sounds for composers, so that they bent them into shapes dictated by their own artistic will – the will that is the source of all movement, all values, and therefore self-created and self-justified. Some described this will as rational, others denied this: but the primacy of the will over scientific reason was common to the entire Romantic school.

Professor Kohn traces the domination of biological and aesthetic images over social thought from Herder's peaceful constellation of many cultures, each with its own unique character, a great diversity which can and must live at peace within the universal harmony of the whole, to the vain efforts of Novalis to reconcile nationalism with the unity of mankind. Novalis could still declare that he preferred Germans to Saxons, Europeans to Germans, men to Europeans; this bridge is broken in Friedrich Schlegel's passionate sermons against assimilation, in the diatribes or Görres against the culture of the corrupt and corrupting French, an attitude which conversion neither to Rome nor to Austrian imperialism could radically alter.

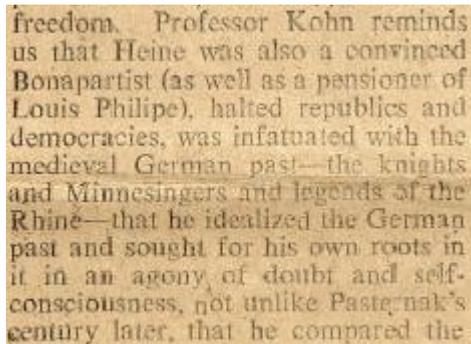
Professor Kohn describes and analyses the wave of hysterical chauvinism, which rose to its first crest in Arndt and Jahn and Adam Müller, so faithfully dealt with twenty years ago by Mr Rohan Butler in his admirable book on this topic. Next in this fatal procession come the nationalist historians infected by Ranke's view of power as a manifestation of spiritual essence – the unity of *Macht* and *Geist* which destroyed the liberal hopes of 1848 and paved the way for the generation of Treitschke, Droysen, Sybel, the militant academic patriots of the Wilhelminian age, the reactionary opposition to Weimar (Dr Kohn does scrupulous justice to the fascinating and ambivalent role of Thomas Mann) and the greatest catastrophe in human history, and the abomina-

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tion of desolation in which it ended, with the aged Meineke like Jeremiah lamenting over the ruins.

In his lucid survey Professor Kohn gives their just due to Goethe and Schiller as the last sane voices of the humane world of Lessing and Kant, although he somewhat underplays the rebellious mood of Schiller's earlier plays; he is more interesting on Heine. The image of Heine is today, particularly east of the Elbe, that of a radical: the great opponent of the semi-feudal Prussian regime of the Restoration, the enemy of slavery and obscurantism everywhere, the intimate and admired friend of Marx, the poet of the emancipation of the senses from the fetters laid on them by priests, pastors and philistines, the worshipper of the Olympian gods, the poet of reason, humanity, individual freedom. Professor Kohn reminds us that Heine was also a convinced Bonapartist (as well as a pensioner of Louis Philippe), hated republics and democracies, was infatuated with the medieval German past – the knights [c] and Minnesingers and legends of the Rhine – [that he idealised the German past]² and sought for his own roots in it in an agony of doubt and self-consciousness not unlike Pasternak a century later, that he compared the Russia of Nicholas I, Christian and 'permeated' by 'liberal ideas', with 'frozen' aristocratic England, to the disadvantage of the latter; that he feared mobs and

² [This near-repetition would perhaps have been struck out if IB had read the proof more carefully:



freedom. Professor Kohn reminds us that Heine was also a convinced Bonapartist (as well as a pensioner of Louis Philippe), hated republics and democracies, was infatuated with the medieval German past—the knights and Minnesingers and legends of the Rhine—that he idealized the German past and sought for his own roots in it in an agony of doubt and self-consciousness, not unlike Pasternak's century later, that he compared the

revolutions and the destruction of civilised elites, and was bitterly reactionary in 1848 – a fact which Engels noted only to be scolded by Marx for his pains.

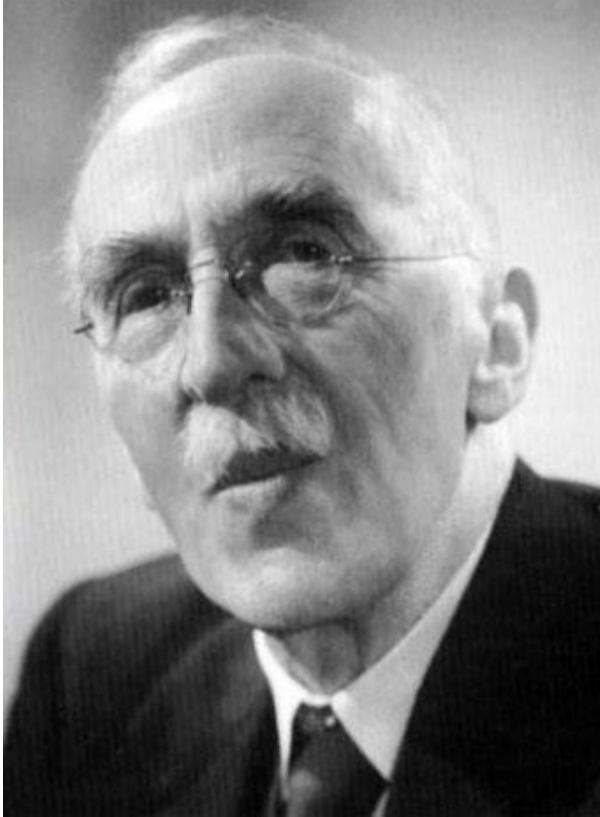
After Heine, Wagner and Nietzsche. Professor Kohn traces their descent too from ‘dark forces of the age and the darker love for one’s people, its way of life and its language’ of which Arndt spoke in 1810 – the forces that, as Heine had predicted, almost overthrew the serene Hellenic divinities for ever. Professor Kohn seeks to explain this early apartheid by the fact that the Germans attempted to achieve liberty before unity, and that the drive towards unity, made inevitable by the development of social and technological forces in the nineteenth century, extinguished the feeble liberal and democratic impulse, or rather absorbed it into itself. He rightly sees in the mass conversion of German liberals to unbridled patriotism, and their violent demands for German self-determination, while denying it to the Poles and the Danes, a manifestation of the most terrifying phenomenon of our own times, the unrestricted growth of nationalism in the nineteenth century, the swift destruction of all movements that resist it, the consequent success only of those ideological movements that have allied themselves with it.

Professor Kohn records the victories of the new barbarism in a humane and dispassionate fashion. His moral is not made less effective by the fact that he describes the rise of the new Germany without anger or hatred, or the desire to mock or horrify or entertain. The result is an indictment of German political thought which scarcely bears out the determined optimism with which the author closes his account.

Dr Gooch inhabits a very different world. His vignettes, small, elegant and beautifully etched, of some of the ideologues of France in the last two centuries have scarcely any point of contact with the Inferno of Dr Kohn. Dr Gooch is the Nestor of European historians; his magnificent contribution to humane scholarship is known wherever civilised men are found; his portraits and sketches breathe the air of an older, more balanced culture than any into

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which the majority of his readers have been born. Indeed some of these miniatures in *French Profiles* might themselves have been painted in the nineteenth century for all the information that they give us about the relevance of the ideas of their authors to later times.



Thus, for example, he speaks of Henri de Saint-Simon as a half-forgotten Utopian writer, a gifted but excessively disorganised visionary who founded a school that traduced [d] his name or ideas and was of interest only to connoisseurs of eccentric figures in the history of ideas. There is nothing here about the Saint-Simonian influence upon the development of French industrialism

and economic centralisation, or on Marxism (oddly enough this is explicitly denied), nor about Saint-Simon's uncannily accurate prophecies of the most significant social and economic developments of the twentieth century.

So too Joseph de Maistre is treated as an obsolete figure, an isolated and reactionary fanatic whose obscurantism largely perished with him; there is not a word about his continuing and increasing influence upon clericalism, and in the end upon authoritarianism and Fascism in France and elsewhere, or his extraordinary predictions of events in Russia, or his analysis of political motives, to which only the experience of our own age and the new sciences of sociology and social psychology have been able to do full justice. Bayle and Fontenelle, Voltaire and Condorcet, Lamennais, Dupanloup and the other leaders of the Catholic revival, Michelet and Taine and Georges Sorel pass before us in rapid succession, leaving no deeper trace upon our imaginations than articles in an old and beautifully written biographical dictionary.

But the prose is so limpid, the attitude so courteous and benign, the learning worn so lightly, the tolerant liberal outlook so placid, civilised and calm that it is a relief to turn to these tranquil pages from the frantic *Walpurgisnacht* in which Professor Kohn's poets and historians, philosophers and political demagogues rave and rant. Professor Kohn's Germany is not the whole, even if it is the most original and ominous aspect, of that country; and the France of Dr Gooch is the familiar image of a formal, polite, sophisticated, exquisitely symmetrical, slightly inhuman culture, an image which can never have been more than a fantasy in the heads of bemused barbarians deluded by a facade constructed by their mentors to amuse themselves and delight their own vanity.

The history of the past hundred years has destroyed this picture for ever in the minds of serious writers. Nevertheless the contrast is still valid enough. The image of Germany as possessed by the violence of the will at the expense of reason and reflection, and by the Romantic drive for self-assertion as against all forms of toleration, compromise and recognition of human rights, is not a

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caricature: we are all too familiar with its power. As for the counter-image of France as dedicated to general principles, order, the subordination of the imagination to disciplined intellect, faith in the power of disinterested ideas, of evidence, of demonstration and the pursuit of rational ends in the light of positive knowledge, that too has enough truth in it to throw the dominant culture of our day – the untidy, empirical, not over-imaginative Anglo-American world, and over against it the fanatical faith in absolute moral intellectual truths by which Russia is to this day sustained – into sharp and disquieting relief.

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