

Ein Zeitalter wird besichtigt

Erinnerungen

H.Mann

August 31-September 6, 2015

A thick book whose focus is much more on the 'Zeitalter' than on the author himself. This makes it heavy going at times, personal anecdotes and recollections, make a far more digestible fare than general philosophical and political expositions. While his brother Thomas writes a careful German, with Heinrich one does at times wonder whether he writes in German at all, as it often is hard to make out his meaning. Such suspicions are of course absurd, it is only that his prose is more demanding. He writes a bit slovenly, rather than carefully put on the paint pixel by pixel as a Medieval painter he uses a wide brush and covers the canvas hungrily in grand sweeps in the manner of an expressionistic painter. One feels that he is constantly out of breath.

The book is written in 1944. The fall of Hitler is a foregone conclusion by then, but it is not clear when. He writes out of understandable indignation, and hails the Soviet Union as the savior, lauds the wisdom and realism ('there will always be wars') of Stalin, waxes lyrically about the country in which full equality has been achieved (not necessarily that you cannot get deservedly rich but never at the expense of others) and thus where the workers has something to fight for. As I recall, Stalin named the war the Great Patriotic one, never trusting that his armies would fight for the sake of Communism. As to Hitler he does not seem to be able to make up his mind. Was he but a pawn of the industrialists or not? He pursues the former train of thought, without really making up a consistent case and thus not even persuading himself. He speaks not that much of anti-semitism, 'Die Vergassung die Juden' is mentioned only once in a subsidiary clause, in the whole book. Instead he focuses on Hitler's anti-Bolshevikism which he sees as crucial to his success. True at the time, as this book testifies to, the full extent of the extermination had not yet been revealed, but of course the atrocities already known were more than enough to inspire loathing and nausea. In particular he brings up the case of young German soldiers skewing living children on their bayonets to serve as food. What had happened, those young soldiers were recently children themselves¹, the author racks his brains in total incomprehension.

Heinrich Mann is a passionate soul, unlike his brother, and also a thinking one, but it is clear that his thinking is subservient to his passions, and one cannot expect a carefully reasoned argument, instead he spews forth in a gigantic stream of consciousness all that

¹ Maybe the accounts were in the form of urban legends, on the other hand given the documented atrocities committed by the Germans later to be revealed, one is liable to believe them of any crime perpetuated against humanity. As to the innocence of children, I am reminded by the remarks of he Polish journalist Kapucinsky, that children make up terrifying soldiers, they lack the fear of death as well as empathy.

passes through his by indignation boiling brain.

He starts from the beginning, or at least the 19th century, giving a survey of the main actors, Great-Britain, Germany, France and Russia. He lauds the British political tradition, how their huge Commonwealth, at the time comprising a fourth of the landmasses of the Earth, is a peaceful voluntary associations of dominions. As to Germany he is an admirer of Bismarck, the only real statesman Germany ever had, and whom they were too stupid to honor and follow. That politics is the art of the possible is a saying contributed to many recent politicians, but the origin is that of Bismarck. He writes almost sentimentally about Bismarck's great love for his wife and his hatred of war and his heroic attempts to preserve peace in Europe. Also about his engagement with Lasalle, and how that resulted in far reaching social reforms, serving as a model for other countries and, as he would not know at the time, for the general Western European commitment to the well-fare state². France is the country of choice for the author. Having at an early age learnt French he would continue throughout his life to cherish French literature, and Henry the Fourth would be his favorite king, whose life and personality he would devote a series of books to. Writing about France, one cannot avoid Napoleon³ whose shadow was long enough to cover the entire century. When Napoleon conquered he liberated the populations and earned the admiration of the liberal intellectuals, such a difference from the wars of conquest in the 20th, an opinion that confirms with that expressed by A.J.P. Taylor⁴. The great catastrophe for the French was of course 1870-71, but unlike the Germans after the First World War they acknowledged their defeat.

The First World War was of course an even greater catastrophe, involving far more countries. The author puts the blame on Germany, the Germans having squandered the legacy of Bismarck. They ended up after all to fight a war on two fronts, even if they managed to dispose of the Russians, they nevertheless had to commit valuable resources which could have made a difference on the Western front, not that Mann regrets the eventual defeat. The Weimar republic was loved by no one, hence it was allowed to lapse with no opposition. This is something he regrets, after all it had the resources to defend itself against its enemies, but neglected to do so. Of the Russian revolution he has only good things to say. It was a continuation of the French, but more radical, committed to communism, which after all, Mann assures his reader, is just that ownership of the basic utilities would be that of the State, not of private individuals, thus preventing the latter from exploiting the rest. Over and over again, and repetition is not necessarily bad, but a well-tried pedagogical device, he stresses the equality of the Soviet society.

Within two weeks of Hitler's 'Machtübernahme' the author undramatically left Berlin and via Frankfurt, Kehl⁵ and Strasbourg arrived in Paris. Having had his German citi-

² Somewhat ominously part of this concern for its general citizens can also be seen in the Nazi-state some of its reforms, such as extended vacations, were taken up and continued after the end of the war, but this would naturally be of no concern to the author at the desperate time he was writing.

³ Earning many a citations in the index, although Hitler, for some reason, although more often mentioned, is not even included in the index, although Göring and Himmler and the rest of the brass are dutifully noted.

⁴ In a book reviewed elsewhere in this volume.

⁵ The town on the other side of the Rhine opposite Strasbourg

zenship revoked, he was given a Czech through the personal intervention of Masaryk, who later also saw to it that Mann's personal belongings were moved to Prague, claiming that his apartment was Czech property. In France he spent seven years in exile warning the French about the pending danger of Hitler. With the collapse of the French army, after just a campaign of six weeks, the situation for Heinrich became untenable. Clearly his head was no longer secured to his body. Using his Czech citizenship he availed himself of the service of the Czech consul in Marseilles. A strenuous crossing over the Pyrenees across to Spain followed, especially taxing as the author was neither young nor even fit for his age. But of course if pressured you can do much more than you think yourself capable of. Then a flight to Lisbon (Lufthansa by the way) a search for a hotel room, a period of waiting to board a Greek ship bound for the States. And so the personal memoirs end to make place for further reflections on the time, I must say to the disappointment of this reader.

There is much which is covered in the book, but as noted, written as a gigantic stream of consciousness, it flows back and forth, bringing up some jetsam and flotsam of his recollections only to discard it and then to pick up the thread again. One particular jetsam being of course Hitler who is picked up repeatedly. He talks about Hitler's incredible luck, something Hitler himself acknowledged, and which must have surprised, even terrified him (i.e Hitler). He had no ideas really of what to do, the ideology was empty, its only guidance was revenge, revenge for imagined slights. And here he makes no real distinction between Hitler and the German nation that followed him so slavishly. All those people who without questioning abrogated their power, also their power of thought, to such a madman. In spite of the undeniable achievements of the country it seemed to suffer from a deep inferiority complex. All its actions being so pointless and gratuitous. When its army was on the verge of collapse it wasted its energy on petty acts of revenge of no strategic importance. The folly of a Hitler thinking he could subjugate the Soviet union in a mere six weeks. Such illusions. They were not even able to fully conquer the French when all was said and done. What had happened to Germany? He recall the distinguished physicist Helmholtz who had always introduced his lectures with the following caveat 'Vorausgesetzt, dass die Natur erkennbar ist'. What would happen now in the forties? How would the young students have responded? 'Entweder versteht er, Giftgase und Gleitbomben zu machen, oder soll den Mund halten'. What happened to the spirit of the elder generations? The descent of Germany into such intellectual and moral chaos remains a mystery, which the author, as well as others, have been unable to resolve. The road towards disaster was not preordained, It could so easily have taken a different turn.

September 7,9, 2015 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*