

The Course of German History

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Taylor does not suffer from as much as he enjoys Germophobia. The book was written just after the end of the War which he sees as the logical conclusion of German destiny. This rather tendentious survey makes for good reading and entertainment, the author generously drops his sarcasms as so many high-explosives and spreads his 'bon mots' around as artillery fire.

The nation of Germany is probably older than the nation of either England and France, due to the formation of the Holy Roman Empire. It can be traced back to Charlemagne, and was of course a feudal contraption of vassals under the nominal authority of the Emperor. The high point of Germany was during the Middle-Ages, according to Taylor. A time of prosperity and local self-government and a proud tradition of independent towns and cities. And also the high-point of the Hanseatic League monopolizing trade on the Baltic.

But early on there were two Germanies, the author reminds the reader. The Germany of the West, and the Germany of the East. It is the former with which most westerners are familiar, it is the civilized country of culture and achievement, while the Germany of the East, whom the Slavs would encounter to their peril, was an expansive and brutal power intent on expansion and subjugation, relentlessly and inexorably driving the Slavs eastwards. This 'Drang nach Osten' is hence something that Taylor identifies as a defining character of the German fate.

Luther was a catastrophe for Germany, Taylor claims. The reformation caused a permanent religious split in the German lands a rift which would never properly heal. Luther was a typical German putting emotions above intellect. Subservience to authority above independence of spirit. Luther who so admirably started out as a fearless rebel, standing up to the Pope and his authority in the end copped out, and instead of becoming the leader of a mass movement, he lost his nerve, got cold feet, and instead of siding with the peasant rebellion of 1525 and becoming indeed a leader of a true mass movement he sided with the princes, whose enthusiasm for religious reform was obviously motivated by the irresistible opportunity for personal gain. As Taylor puts it *Luther gave to Germany a national consciousness and, through his translation of the Bible, a national tongue; but he also gave to Germany the Divine Rights of Kings, or rather the Divine Rights of any established authority. Obedience was the first and last duty of the Christian man.* The Treaty of Augsburg 1555 is sometimes seen as the triumph liberty and tolerance, but he remarks sarcastically, it was really the triumph of the liberty of the princes, and put an end to the old German Reich, but would not put anything in its stead. As is well known, the Catholics wanted to roll back the Protestant movement, which of course endowed the Habsburg dynasty with a welcome excuse to reassert their power over the whole of Germany, which led, as we all know, to the Thirty Years War, ignited by the Protestant rebellion in Bohemia, during which the imperial forces were initially victorious, until the joint ven-

ture by the Catholic French, mortal enemies of the Habsburgs, whose lands threatened to encircle them, and the Protestant Swedes, hungry for conquest and riches, rallying to a cause, which so conveniently presented itself. In the Civil War that followed, the Germans themselves had very little say, their destiny controlled by outside forces. In the Treaty of Westphalia, their power was circumscribed by the French and the Swedes (who would soon drop out of the game, so glorious in retrospect, having overextended themselves), and it established the notion that the Habsburg dynasty was something apart from Germany. In retrospect, German unity would have been the preferred thing, and its only realistic means would have been a Catholic unification by the Habsburgs, the prevention of which had caused so much blood to flow. In fact, according to the author, the Treaty destroyed whatever political tradition there may have been. As to it being a religious war, he scoffs at the notion, remarking that in any age rulers trying to survive expand has to be able to talk the clap-trap of what currently is fashionable, and at the time, it happened to be religion.

During the remainder of the 17th century and throughout the 18th century Germany was a divided nation, of free cities, and with a few exceptions, small principalities. As a consequence the princes were too feeble to play any political role on a larger stage, but of course powerful enough to act as despots in their backyards. It was not conducive to any development of political maturity in contradistinction to the courses of English and French history, according to the author. The prince of Hannover would ally himself with the English by having its throne served to him on a platter, a rather unexpected consequence of the Glorious Revolution, which however, had shorn his title of any power. Thus the English connection would have little if any practical consequences for his status as a German prince and even less for his principality. The only real exception to German impotence was the course for the state of Brandenburg, an erstwhile ally of the invading Swedes, which revived at the end of the 17th century and was able to take advantage of the accelerated decay of the Polish state and outpace the rivalry of Saxony. Acquiring Prussia in the early 18th century, it changed its name, as a bride at a wedding, got a new start and a foothold and under the inspired leadership of Fredrick the Great, greatly expanded and consolidated itself, getting chunks of Poland during the general feeding frenzy occasioned by the three partitions at the end of that century. The territorial relationship between Poland and Prussia, is a bit more complicated than Taylor lets on. To him it is a case of relentless German expansion at the expense of the poor Slavs. But I believe that it was Russia which usurped the lions part of the partitions, incorporating most of the heartland of the former Polish nation. Admittedly acquiring the Baltic stretch indicates a usurpation, Poland as a nation was never landlocked, otherwise it was the region around Posen that brought Poles under Prussian suzerainty, because at the time, large scale ethnic cleansing was not a necessary concomitant of conquest. As to the rise of Prussia Taylor has nothing but contempt. On his words its resources were contemptibly small, no industry, no important cities, no outlet to the sea. Its land barren and unyielding, as was its cultural life. A despicable country good for nothing except savage conquest. It would certainly have remained so, had it not been for the above-mentioned inspired leadership of Fredrick, who willed the country to reach a level beyond itself, creating by pure will alone an entity as artificial as a canal, having little to do with Germany at large, her only asset consisting

in the ruthlessness she had acquired during long years of oppressing her Slavs. It was a conquered land, and thus so more suitable to become a conqueror of others.

Prussia, exceptional as a German principality, in fact honored as a Kingdom, it was nevertheless but a regional power, against the armies of Napoleon it was helpless. The defeat at Jena was a national disaster, a humiliation, almost beyond repair, because after all, Prussia itself, according to Taylor, was for all practical purposes identical with its army. Its civil administration being just a branch of the military. The humiliation as usual bred resentment, and the humiliation being so complete, the ensuing resentment beyond all bounds, in the words of the author. In fact Napoleon was bent upon obliterating Prussia once and for all, and only the sentimental intervention of the Russian Czar, saved it from its ultimate fate. The Austrians also suffered defeat, but that only stopped their action, did not threaten their very existence. With Napoleon came political liberation, which the middle class appreciated. Taylor is making a point that this liberalization and liberation of Germany was something imposed from the outside, not something they achieved by their own efforts and power. In fact the German liberals were impotent, as they thought about power itself as being dirty and illiberal, but of course liberalism without power to back it up, is just wind of the mouth. Thus Napoleon, instead of being seen as enslaving the Germans, actually his fault lay in his emancipation of them, for which he was never thanked. Eventually the armies of Napoleon were rolled back by the Russians, with the enthusiastic support by the Prussians. They learned their lesson, by making the State even harsher, more efficient and absolute than before. In particular its much lauded educational reform had only one purpose, according to the bitter author, namely to further the militarization of the State, which more than anything else would decide the future of Germany. The rise of nationalistic feeling caused by the Napoleonic conquest was divided. One part of it looked to the Austrian Emperor as the most realistic means of recreating the Germany of the old, nostalgically envision its medieval status of free cities, the other part seeing in the humiliated Prussia its best bet for carrying on the nationalist program, as many of the German princes had benefitted from Napoleon as he had expanded their territories and enhanced their titles. There was Metternich and the restoration of 1815 and Prussia was as noted reborn like the Phoenix, even expanding getting lands west of the Rhine, a predominantly Catholic population, which actually preferred French rule. And the Prussians were not that happy about the addition either, as having lost a Polish population of serfs they instead got an unruly German one. And German nationalism was mostly an student affair, thus academic engaging only a thin sliver of the population. The Congress of Vienna created the Confederation of Germany, excluding not only Hungary but also the Eastern lands of Prussia. Both Marx and Bismarck were born around that time.

In 1871 Germany was united into a single political entity. The road taken was complicated, yet took much less time to transverse than had been expected. It was the work of mostly one man - Bismarck, the towering political genius who dominated continental politics during the latter third of the 19th century. The first stop on that road was the various customs unions, the first attempts being, according to Taylor, just selfish attempts of Prussia to increase its economic powers, eventually it led to a 'Zollverein'. Then came 1848, the year of revolutions throughout Europe. In Paris, Berlin and Vienna. It cre-

ated a confederate assembly consisting of intellectuals and professionals, without any real power beyond that of making high-sounding proclamations. One of those were to offer the imperial crown to the Prussian King, who was advised to turn it down, as coming from the gutter, only the princes would have the authority to offer something like it. No revolutions were more inspired by ideas than those of that year, Taylor writes, but never before had they been discredited to that extent. Even a Radical like Marx, in the view of the author, had no real interest and connection to the masses, he viewed them mainly as cannon fodder for the revolution. And to Marx revolution was paramount, socialism was only an excuse not its purpose. 1848 was to become the turning point of German history, with a chance of liberal ideas finally getting a firm foothold to turn. But Germany did not turn. It failed. The Prussian king appeared at first to capitulate, but in the end the revolution itself aborted and gave way to all his demands. University professors and other professionals had until then constituted a serious and respected political force, afterwards they were marginalized. The capitalists accepted dictatorship as grudgingly as their British counterparts accepted democracy. All according to Taylor. Soon thereafter Bismarck took the reins, riding the horse of the King with admirable tact and cunning. According to Taylor, the overriding ambition of Bismarck was to preserve the position of the Junkers out of which he was sprung. The name stems etymologically from a confluence of 'Jung' and 'Herr' and did originally relate to young noblemen. In Prussia it refers to the landowning class, some of which had huge estates, but most were rather modest in their landed possessions, and did not constitute, unlike their counterparts in France and England a leisured class. As far as nobility goes, they tended to be of lower ranks, surviving solely above the level of simple peasants, due to the exploitation of Slavic serfs devoid of any legal status. Once again Taylor emphasizes that the land on which they made their living was sandy and poor. If anything provincial greatness. They constituted the bulwark of the Hohenzoller dynasty, and dominated the armed forces due to the law that estates were not to be split but to be handed down to the eldest son. In fact those primitive barbarians, according to Taylor, who had just learned to handle a rifle as well as double entry book-keeping were indispensable for the dynasty, in managing the ordinarily contradictory aims of maintaining an authoritative rule and an efficient one balancing accounts. The attachment Bismarck felt for them was obviously sentimental, he was in fact highly educated and sophisticated thanks to his mother not his slow-witted father, and hence tended to despise his fellow nobles, but none the less passionate; and would deeply influence the future history of Germany. In particular it meant the rejection of the Greater Germany, for a Kleindeutsch option, meaning that the multi-ethnic Austrian empire had to be kept out from German affairs, because in such a wider context, the privileges of the Junkers would not persist, as in fact the spread of Germans was by no means limited to German lands. Ever since the Middle-Ages, German trades people had dominated the eastern markets, and the big cities from Riga down to Lemberg (Lviv) had, according to the author, a distinctive German tenor. And with the Germans came the Jews, speaking the old Rhenish dialect of Yiddish. As to Bismarck himself, Taylor characterizes him unsurprisingly as the greatest German politician incorporating in himself all the German contradictions. Outwardly harsh, resolute and fearless, inwardly highly strung not to say hysterical. A bully who when meeting with serious opposition liable to go into a frenzy.

He dwelled in a half-mad world in which he expected every statesman to be as cunning and subtle, as well as ruthless as himself. However, Taylor points out, one cannot blame him for the development Germany would eventually take. He had to deal with Germans after all, a people who had learnt nothing but obedience to authority and to admire force. The Germans, and by implication also Bismarck (?), had learned to master the mechanics and the intellectual side of civilization, while being oblivious of its spirit. Yet the author claims nevertheless that the catastrophe that befall the country was his longterm legacy, while its short time was extended peace and prosperity

A series of wars followed. The Danish king was also the duke of Schleswig and Holstein, meaning that he was also a vassal of the German emperor in his capacity as a German prince. Around 1848 things came to a head due to the problem of succession following upon the inevitable death of a monarch. The Danes would have liked to merge the principalities with the mother country, but Holstein, as opposed to Schleswig, had a German population, not immune to pan-German feelings. There followed two wars, the first in which the Prussians were restrained by British and Russian interference, the second in 1864, when Prussia was in league with Austria and Bismarck had prepared the ground diplomatically beforehand. The spoils were divided by the two countries, although in the end, after the short military confrontation with Austria, Prussia took it all, abstaining from territorial demands on Austria itself. In 1870 the French emperor Napoleon III maneuvered himself into a war with Prussia, which he quickly lost, with disastrous consequences. Morally fortified by the success, the southern German states decided to join into the unification, which was proclaimed at Versailles in 1871. The key to the success was the railway timetable, immaculate planning and efficiency characterized the Prussians. Yet the highest faculties of the mind, and those, the author concedes, the Germans possessed, were put to the services of a mindless cause. Thus, Taylor reminds us, Bismarck's real greatness lay not in mastering events, but going with the events so as to seem to master them. After all, Bismarck, I recall, is the real author of the saying that politics is the art of the possible. More damningly though, Taylor further suggests, that the real genius of Bismarck was his ability to always postpone.

While the affairs of Austria had been mismanaged, the government just content with muddling through, Prussia had been competently ruled like a perfect state its finances in perfect order, its wealth growing, a series of reforms implemented, some of which we have already commented upon. Still Germany was a predominantly agricultural country, but industrialization took place at high speed, especially after unification, abetted by reparations imposed on the French. But more importantly though, as Taylor indicates. The men of education and vision went into industry not politics, so no wonder it became the wonder of the world. Bismarck overarching goal was to confine the new Germany. He had no interest in the Germans in Habsburg lands, nor those who had drifted into the Balkans. The suppression of the Poles in the east being of paramount importance, a natural ally throughout the Bismarck years was with Russia. While the international successes of Bismarck were spectacular, he did not perform as well on the domestic front, setting up a *Kulturkampf* against the Catholics, natural enemies of the Junkers, the various results of which were questionable and to some extent reversed. After which he turned against the Social Democrats, pre-empting many of their demands by far-reaching social

reforms. The liberals as well saw many reforms enacted by him, and much faster than they would have been able to enact on their own. One big mistake, according to Taylor, was the Protectionism, intended partly to protect the Junkers from the competition of cheap Russian and American wheat but also extended to the burgeoning industrialists. Without protection, there would have been no such grandiose production of iron and steel, more imports, more of an inducement to concentrate on the finishing industries. In all it would have meant a richer country, in particular a higher level of standard of living for the general population. And most importantly, according to Taylor, it would have meant a more intimate inclusion in the world market making war impossible. Ironically it contributed to the Greater-Germany, which Bismarck had always resisted, and by ostensibly protecting the Junkers it was to lead to their eventual downfall. As to colonial adventures, Bismarck was basically indifferent, clearly they were not worth the candle, on the other hand he saw in them an excuse to summon domestic popularity by challenging the British. When the British conceded to his spurious demands his plans were foiled and he was stuck with unwanted bounty. The real problem was the need of expansion, to which colonies were only an illusory solution. Germany became fated to constrict this urge to its immediate surroundings, in fact to achieve European dominance. As a Chancellor, Bismarck's legitimacy rested on the support and confidence of the Kaiser, not on the Reichstag. Thus he acted in practice like a dictator, which, as has been noted, did not augur well for the political future of Germany. In fact, as Taylor puts it ' Bismarck the greatest of political Germans, was for Germany the greatest disaster'.

The Old Kaiser died, the one with which the Chancellor had had such a long and trusting relationship. He was succeeded by his son, a man of some liberal principles married to a daughter of Queen Victoria, but whose time was running out, only to die after a few months and be succeeded by his son, the windbag William II. Bismarck, whose domestic performance had not been up to par, lost the trust of the new emperor and as was generally noted, the German ship lost its pilot. The parties on the right supported Bismarck, but were of course unable to oppose the emperor. The parties on the left were willing to oppose the emperor, but of course unwilling to support Bismarck. He was on his own and had to go. His later efforts to stir up opposition to the emperor, were motivated by spite, not to obtain power. No Chancellor to succeed Bismarck could fill his shoes. There was Caprivi initially and then predominantly von Bülow, the latter humiliating the emperor and hence had to step down. None of them were able to play the diplomatic game of alliances, hence finding the country circumscribed by enemies. By the dismissal of von Bülow, the last one to try and wield the vast power of a chancellor, Bismarck had for his own purposes invested the institution with, real power went to the military, whose leaders were as politically innocent and aloof as monks. According to Taylor Germany now had no option other than expansion and hence he considers the issue of so called war-guilt not so much a case of diplomatic blunders as based on a relentless drift, with wide popular support, of dominating Europe. Bismarck as a Chancellor had not been that interested in military matters, leaving that to the discretion of the professionals, with his dismissal, they gained more and more power, supplemented with the somewhat hysterical attempts to build a strong navy seen as a provocation to the British, and serving no useful purpose at all, save that of demagogy. As the one diplomatic crisis after another followed, there

really was no longer anyone to govern the country, as opposed to merely administering it, thus there was no countermeasures strong enough to stem the tides of events. Typically Taylor does not even mention Sarajevo, and somewhat eccentrically he does not refer to it as the First World War, but as the Four Years War. Hence Taylor points out that to accuse Germany of having planned and provoked the war would credit it with more foresight and direction than it actually possessed.

We all know what happened. The Germans were eventually overpowered after having in practice been run as a military dictatorship with Hindenburg and Ludendorff at the helm. The army was beaten but undefeated, meaning that instead of letting things continue to their logical end, resulting in a bona fide check mate, they were aborted by resigning. The conditions imposed at Versailles were harsh and humiliating, provoking the eventual sympathy of the British, yet no harsher nor more humiliating than those imposed on the French half a century earlier. And besides the Germans were able to wrangle out of most of the repartitions anyway. The greatest humiliation though, according to the author, was that the settlement forced them to consider the Slavs at the same level as themselves. Taylor has no truck with the argument that the financial hardships imposed on Germany precipitated the catastrophic inflation. This, he seems to imply, was self-willed (simply a failure of taxing the rich, according to the author) and was easily rectified when the will to do so was present. On the contrary, he argues, the repartitions were instead instrumental in bringing about the German revival during the years of relative prosperity of 1923-29. And besides, he points out, the Germans received much more in loans (they never repaid) than they paid in repartitions. Those years were seen by outside sympathetic observers as a manifestation finally of the normal and true Germany, while Taylor sees it as an aberration, and in no way caused by any putative beauty of the German character. In fact the real hardship the Germans experienced after the war was simply due to the war and hence of their own making. How could they expect the Allies to reconstruct their railway network, which had been used to carry German soldiers to the front? Anyway during the postwar years the Germans, under the leadership of Stresemann, managed to effect the one concession after the other.

The fall of the imperial monarchy, was connected with a revolutionary situation, which might have led to a socialist revolution, in fact the chances of it succeeding were probably greater than that of the Bolshevik one, but the reactionary forces of violence proved to be too resistant, and with the destruction of the Spartacist the eventual failure turned into a foregone conclusion. The Weimar republic was born like an unwanted child loved by none. Weimar apart from its association with Goethe and Schiller, but really devoid of any geographical, political or economic significance, and hence so suitable as a symbol of German liberalism. The Weimar constitution was a text-book example as written by a professor of political science, filled with admirable phrases and devices. In practice it would turn out to be an instrument to cripple democracy, not to strengthen it. Hitler did his first attempt at a Putsch already in 1923, and Taylor finds it remarkable that it took so long for him to come to power, something he seems to think was more or less inevitable given the general tenor of the population. The crash of 1929 also hit Germany with high unemployment, and the last years of the Weimar Republic only manifested its doom, with the Centrist chancellor Brüning of the unprincipled Center, whose only goal was to look

out for the interests of the Roman Catholics, and later the conservative van Papen who thought he could control Hitler, the demagogue who had been able to sell the Great-German idea to the general populace. The Nazis were seen as the gangsters they were, and hardly fit to be kept in furnished rooms, yet they were very useful, but once employed, which was inevitable, they took over by dint of being so much more unscrupulous. Taylor regrets, as did Hobsbawm, that the Communists were more engaged with attacking the Social Democrats than forming a popular front which might possibly have stemmed the tide. Of course once the Nazis had consolidated their power their members were more than willing to rally to their cause. Taylor over and over again stressing the popular support of the regime, and rejecting any notion, so popular retrospectively, that Hitler somehow was imposed on them. The German population was more than ready to be taken in by demagogy. In fact according to Taylor, it corresponded to their deepest wishes, and the Third Reich, unworkable without terror, secret police and concentration camps, was the only German government created by German initiative. More regrettable than the public support was the readiness of the professional and intellectual elite to accommodate themselves, revealing more than anything else the German rottenness at the core. With Hitler, finally someone at least ruled in Berlin. Then of course Hitler put the country in order, a task for which dictatorships are well equipped, by rearmament, setting the wheels of economics rolling, and the improvement of infrastructure, notably Autobahns, who served the same strategic military purpose as railways had done previously. Hitler played the diplomatic game competently, as illustrated by Munich. The Anschluss of Austria was greeted enthusiastically by its population. There was a wavering between Big-German and Little-German ambitions. The fact of the pact with the Soviets and the joint invasion of Poland (a crime that was as the Soviets were concerned subsequently forgiven and almost forgotten) indicated that the latter policy, at least initially took over, although of course only as a tactics. Possibly Hitler had not counted on the reaction of the English and the French. The main fact was that Hitler had managed to keep the Russians divided from the West, in the crucial years up to 1941. It was this feat that made possible the initial triumphs. The attack on the Soviet Union amounted to the climax of German history, logically bringing together everything it had always been aiming for. It was also its turning point. The conclusion of the war was a foregone conclusion, material superiority in the end makes the difference. It is notable that Taylor only refers to anti-semitism once, calling it Socialism of fools, and stock-in-trade of any nationalistic movement. Instead he waxes a lot on their policy of extermination of the East, meaning the Slavs, to make Lebensraum, just as the American colonists exterminated the Native population. By the defeat of Hitler, the Thousand Year Reich came to an end, not the one Hitler had imagined, whose tenure was blessedly brief, but the real Reich which in one form or another had existed for a thousand years.

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