

DB - 30
Four Conceits

Plockstrasse 8
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers:
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

What is it that makes the German different than the Frenchman or the Italian or the American? Some will cite the all too renowned theory of the national inferiority complex. Others will finger the tense span between groveling obedience and blatant vainglory. Whatever the formula, most observers of the German scene are sooner or later tempted to generalize about German character.

Rather than give in to the enticement, I propose to discuss a type of behavior which may be exceptional among Germans, but perhaps exceptionally German at the same time.

This characteristic may be called conceit.

Yet it also contains elements of neurotic vanity, of unconscious arrogance, yes, even a touch of hallucination. One might almost say purblindness in the dictionary sense of "spiritual obtuseness".

Tolstoy offers a definition of it in War and Peace. The Frenchman, he said, is conceited because he imagines himself fascinating to men and women, the Englishman because he always knows the correct thing to do, the Italian because he gets excited and forgets himself, the Russian because he is ignorant... And the German? Tolstoy writes: "A conceited German is the worst of them all, and the most hardened of them all, and the most repulsive of all; for he imagines that he possesses the truth in a science of his own invention, which to him is absolute truth."

Yet the type of conceit I wish to discuss is more pitiable than repulsive. In an American context we might ascribe it to members of the lunatic fringe. As such, it cannot be imputed to Germans, generally.

To illustrate this quality I have selected four examples - all of them living Germans. Two are famous. The other two are obscure. The first two are extreme instances, the second rather mild.

H i s B e n i g n e s t H o u r

Exactly 17 years ago, at 6 p.m. May 10, 1941, Walter Richard Rudolf Hess climbed into a new Messerschmitt fighter plane at an Augsburg airdrome and took off for England. His mission: to persuade Britain to make peace with Hitler's Reich.

At the time, the 45-year-old Hess was Reich Minister without portfolio, Member of the Ministerial Council for Defense of the Reich, Member of the Secret Cabinet Council for Germany, and Führer of the National Socialist German Workers Party.

The career of the dark, Egyptian-born Hess had been singular. Drawn to the Nazi Party in its infant days, he became Hitler's secretary in 1921, his bodyguard four years later. On the eve of success, Hitler named him head of the party's political section, in 1932. Seven years later, this intimate confidant and friend of the Führer became Hitler's personal deputy. Rudolf worshipped Adolf.

Once the war started, there wasn't much for Hess to do - no more big Party rallies with torches and flags, no more diplomatic ceremonies. Hitler was busy playing field marshal. The Deputy Führer twiddled his thumbs. Then, like so many Nazis, Hess dreamed of doing a great deed for the Third Reich. It was part of the ritual.

The idea began to eat its way into this warped idealist's brain. Felix Kersten, the therapist who ministered to Himmler and Hess, writes in his memoirs of a drive through war-torn Belgium with Rudolf: "...The war should not last any longer. The world must come to see that Germany is unconquerable. And he, Hess, had to stretch out his hand, to bring about a reconciliation between Germany and other nations."

Kersten continues: "Another time he told me that he had to concentrate all his powers and harden himself - he needed all his strength for the deed which would secure the salvation of Germany. When I asked what he meant by this 'salvation', Hess replied that he could not tell me, but that he was preparing for an act of historic importance."

Apparently, Hess told no one about his preparations, not even Hitler, and not even Willi Messerschmitt, from whom he obtained the plane and facilities for practicing long distance flight. There were no confederates.

Finally, on that May evening, Hess donned a flight lieutenant's uniform and embarked for Scotland. His destination was the Duke of Hamilton's estate at Dungavel. Hess had chosen Hamilton because he knew him from the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936. The Duke was also Lord Steward, and Hess was sure he would provide direct access to King George. After a 750-mile flight, Hess parachuted from the plane and landed ten miles from the Duke's estate. A farmer "captured" him and took him to the Duke, who forthwith telephoned Prime Minister Churchill. Hess was immediately turned over to British security police, who escorted him to the Tower of London and locked him up.

The news flashed around the world, news that astounded the Nazis as much as it did the free world; Hitler's right-hand man in England! Was it treason or diplomacy, madness or calculation? In a series of interviews with a foreign Office representative, Hess tried to make his intentions clear. First, he reviewed Anglo-German relations for the previous 30 years. Second, he described the "certainty" of Germany's victory. Third, he asserted that Hitler had no designs on the British Empire. All Germany wanted was a free hand in Europe. Therefore, England and Germany should come to a truce; in which case Hitler would not make severe demands on the British.

"I thought that if England once knew of this," said Hess, "it might be possible that England on her part would be ready for agreement."

But England wasn't ready for such a sell-out. Under its indomitable Prime Minister, the nation was sworn to conquer Hitler or perish trying. So Rudolf Hess was kept behind bars, despite the act that Churchill called "a devoted and fanatic deed of lunatic benevolence." Since then, Hess has been shunted from one prison to another - Aldershot, Nürnberg, and finally Spandau, where he sits today.

Doctors who examined Hess on his arrival in London reported that he was in good health, unexcited, and showing no "ordinary signs of insanity." A recent report from Spandau calls him "definitely psychotic." Plenty of medical literature on Hess's mental condition has appeared in the intervening years.

It is difficult to believe that Hess was insane when he made his lone flight; although neurotic he certainly was. No, Hess seized an idea, and then the idea seized Hess. In his purblind conceit, he began to believe that he and his idea could save the cause of the Third Reich all by themselves, ignoring the realities of both Nazi Germany and democratic Britain. Instead, this hallucination doomed him to imprisonment and ridicule.

P o o r H a r i c h ' s A l m a n a c k

Only a few miles away from Hess's cell in Spandau is another political prisoner who is likewise a victim of conceit. His name is Wolfgang Harich and he just began the second year of a 10-year term in an East German penitentiary.

Harich is one of those strange figures tossed on the waves of Marxist turbulence that were raised in the Soviet satellites by Nikita Khrushchchev's volcanic denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress. During the summer of 1956, Harich and some of his Communist friends in East Berlin began to think rebellious Marxist thoughts. They did so at the same time Professor Georg Lukacs and his Petöfi Circle gathered in Budapest to scheme a new course for Communist Hungary, and at the same time Polish intellectuals were planning reforms of their Communist ideology.

At 35, Dr. Wolfgang Harich had already made a brilliant career in East Germany's Socialist Unity Party (the name of the Communist Party in the Soviet Zone). He was Professor of Marxist Philosophy, chief editor in the Government's Aufbau Publishing House, editor of a philosophy journal, and a star campaigner for the Party doctrine.

The striking thing about de-Stalinization among the satellite intellectuals like Harich was not so much the condemnation they heaped upon the dead dictator in echo of Khrushchchev. Much more it was the fact that their own Marxist musings brought them to new theories of socialism - those which are now grouped under the heading "Revisionism."

In Poland and Hungary, the revisionists helped cause the dramatic 1956 revolutions. In East Germany, the revisionists under Harich's leadership performed a tragi-comic little skit which landed them all in the pokey.

The ideas which took possession of Harich and his followers were quite similar to those of the Lukacs group in Budapest. However, the general mood of the East Germans was no where near as rebellious as that of the Poles and Hungarians. Therefore, it was not until after the uprisings in Budapest and Warsaw that Dr. Harich saw fit to act.

Then he drew up a reform program for East Germany. It was composed of strong stuff. Here are some excerpts:

"We don't want to break with Marxism-Leninism; rather we want to liberate it (the party) from Stalinism and dogmatism and return to its humanistic and undogmatic processes of thought.

"...The domination of the party apparatus over its members must be radically broken. Democratic centralism following the principles of Marx, Engels, and Lenin must be re-established in the practice of our party.

"...Production must be transferred to the raising of the living standard of the mass of people (Malenkov course). ...Worker councils must be set up in all enterprises. ...Forced collectivization must be stopped...establishment of autonomy for the universities...legal security, dissolution of the secret police and secret justice...full sovereignty of parliament...complete de-burocratization of the Administration from top to bottom...get rid of the Stalinist-Ulbricht group..."

Several days after the Hungarian rebellion broke out, Dr. Harich stuffed a copy of his platform into his briefcase and marched off to visit his party superiors, Fred Oelssner, Paul Wandel, and Kurt Hager. His pale eyes must have shone like those of a boy who wants to build a hut in the family oak tree. He had a plan.

The big shots didn't even let Harich get past their secretaries. They knew which way the wind was blowing.

Undaunted, Harich took his program and tackled still another authority on October 26. This time he went to see Comrade Puschkin, Ambassador of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the German Democratic Republic. Puschkin received the young man with diplomatic cordiality. Then he passed the word on to the puppet government strongman, Walter Ulbricht: Harich wants to dump you.

But Dr. Harich wasn't through yet. His bold program had gripped him so, he felt impelled to discuss it with Party Secretary Ulbricht himself. Around about November 10, he paid a visit to the East German boss with the Lenin beard. Apparently, Harich had the nerve even to tell Ulbricht that he would have to step down if socialism was to succeed in Germany.

Then, 14 days later, Harich journeyed to West Germany to attend a philosophy conference and to talk over his great scheme with some journalists in the Federal Republic. One of them later wrote: "Harich wanted to secure the victory of socialism for all Germany...he would allot the role of trailbreaker for German unity to the regime of the Soviet Zone." Visiting West Germany is a perilous undertaking for East German officials.

Shortly after his return on November 26, 1956, Harich was slapped in jail.

He sat there until March 4, 1957, when he was hauled before the First Penal Senate of East Germany's Supreme Court. The prosecutor was Attorney General Ernst Melsheimer, a mean customer in the name of Communist law. To nobody's surprise, Harich was sentenced to a decade in prison after a 6-day trial. Two of his colleagues got terms of two and four years. All three were found guilty of "incitement to boycott against democratic institutions" (Article 6 of the East German Constitution). The crime corresponds roughly to sedition.

Surely a man in Harich's position could have foreseen the course Moscow would take after the Polish and Hungarian insurrections. Surely he could have known the Stalinist policy of Walter Ulbricht well enough to imagine how he would react to revisionist schemes, not to mention the Soviet ambassador. Surely he could have anticipated the consequences of a holiday venture into capitalistic West Germany.

But no. Wolfgang Harich possessed a program, and the program possessed Wolfgang Harich. He, Dr. Harich, would save the cause of socialism in Germany, singlehanded. He would sacrifice himself to his own intellectual arrogance, to his own conceit. "Oh Harich," wrote a West German friend after the trial, "Poor Harich!"

T w o O d d A u t h o r s

The next two characters can scarcely be compared with the Herren Hess and Harich. For one thing, neither of them is in prison. For another, their little conceits have not caused them any major trouble. Possibly because of their relative obscurity they will do to shed a little more light on the subject.

The first is a journalist named Richard Tüngel. During the past winter, he and another journalist co-authored a book entitled Auf dem Bauche sollst Du kriechen (You Should Crawl On Your Belly). Together, Tüngel and the other journalist tell the story of Germany under the Allied occupation as they experienced it. Search as you may, you will find neither author crawling on his belly in these pages, nor creeping, nor wriggling.

Instead, on the second page of his story, we find Herr Tüngel telling of his thoughts the day Hamburg was seized by British Army units in 1945:

"Neither Lachmann (his host) nor I wanted to content ourselves with the purely passive role which the British intended for us Germans. We were of the opinion that it was necessary to stand by our liberators with candid advice in their relative helplessness regarding German problems. The most important question which then concerned all Germans was this: What should become of the former (Nazi) Party Members? Should they be punished? And how? ...This, so we felt, must be talked over in a larger circle, so that we could arrive at a common decision which we could lay before the English. So we formed a group..."

The man who wrote this was at the time about 48 years old. He had been a newspaperman in Berlin, had written a mediocre play which the Nazis banned, and belonged to the middle ranks of German journalists. Not until he and several others founded Die Zeit, West Germany's first post-war political weekly, did Tüngel achieve any degree of prominence. This was the man who was generous enough to want to stand by the British in their hour of need.

And this was the Germany that had been beaten to its knees, the rubble still smoking, the endless columns of refugees still trekking, the gas chambers of the Konzentrationslager still redolent of cyanide. In this moment, Tüngel heard the secret voice which seemed to echo Nelson: "England expects every German to do his duty."

So Tüngel and his homegrown experts met for many weeks. They discussed the framework of an occupation policy - especially the theory of collective guilt.

He writes: "...I must say, it cost me some trouble before I could make my opinion prevail...Only those may be punished who are guilty by German law. We condensed this decision in a memorandum and sent it to the English Military Government with the request to listen to us and to consult us on decisions concerning the question of denazification."

Three years later, Tüngel continues, the Military Government got in touch with him. He was informed that the British had nothing against it if he wanted to enter his "circle" in the official register of organizations. Indeed, why not?

But this was Tüngel's only post-war plan. He cites another, this time concerning France. It was the winter of 1946 when he sent New Year's greetings to the then Premier, Georges Bidault, along with the advice that France and Germany must make peace with each other. Bidault replied in a friendly tone. So Tüngel took it upon himself to give the Premier a few tips:

"Right away I wrote him a second letter in which I asked him to promote the good relations between France and Germany by three means: To renounce the annexation of the Saar, to adapt conditions in the French Zone to those in the British and American Zones, and to free the German prisoners of war."

Tüngel was told to stop writing Premier Bidault. This astonished him.

The point to be emphasized here is not the rightness or wrongness of Herr Tüngel's schemes. Rather it is the manner in which he promoted them. He, Richard Tüngel, the self-appointed conscience of all "good Germans" expected his wee voice to be heard and followed in the councils of the mighty. The fact that it wasn't rankled enough to make him blast his opponents 12 years later.

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The fourth and last example is a 51-year-old Frankfurt merchant, Dr. Werner Schumann. Of the quartet, he is probably the most pitiable, since he had to pay hard cash for his conceit. Dr. Schumann is the author of a sizeable autobiography entitled "Youth of a Leipziger".

According to his modest 4-page forward, Herr Schumann arrived in the literary world via letters to his son. In these letters he told of his hard but determined life as a lad in Leipzig. One day he showed the letters to a friend. "I should publish them," the friend advised, "for all mankind."

Probably Dr. Schumann's volume does not differ greatly from other amateur autobiographies. The author portrays himself flatteringly as a combination Horatio Alger and Dale Carnegie - how he challenged his bullying big brother to a fight and got a bloody eye ("We never spoke a word between us after that."); how the only girl in his school fell for him and committed suicide after he dropped her ("It is utterly possible that she was a victim of love."); how his parents were stingy with him ("I became a realist"); how he became a leader in his school despite low marks ("I was neither an egoist nor a braggart."), and finally, graduation ("The principal said nothing about my services to the school.")

However, Schumann was not content with a mere portrayal. And so the last section of his book is entitled: "What Lessons Can Today's Youth Draw From The Biography Of My Youth?"

There follow 36 pages of advice, such as: "Youth cannot rely on school and church alone. Rather they must do everything they can to educate themselves. The book before you will show you the way. It is a book written for youth and for simple people, for they need my book and my advice the most... I accomplished less with my school learning than with my mind and reason, and with my spiritual power, and you should learn that too, for you need that just as much as knowledge... If you imitate me the way I have described it, you will have at least the same successes I had, if not greater."

And so on.

Dr. Schumann's second publication for all mankind is entitled: "Student Days of a Leipziger". Its chapter headings give an indication of his continuing successes. They run: "Chapter 1, Erika", then "Gerda", "The Beautiful Turk", "Ilse", "Herta", "Herta Loves Me", Evelyn and Susette", and finally, "Susette". This last chapter also contains, "Practical suggestions for easing a working student's life and for personality development in young students."

This work is, according to its author, "a valuable supplement to the book, 'Youth of a Leipziger', issued by "Pedagogical Publishing House" (Dr. Werner Schumann, publisher).

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No nation has cornered the market on conceit. Yet it might be well to recall that the Germans once elected a monstrously conceited man to be their chancellor and later Führer.

How much better it is to put conceit up for sale in a bookstore like Herr Tüngel and Herr Schumann, than to turn it into politics like Hess, Harich, and Hitler!

David Binder
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