

CHAPTER 2.

Stefan Zweig was an Austrian Jew, and in his book “The World of Yesterday” he begins by describing the civilization of Europe before 1914, as seen through the eyes of a member of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was far from perfect; it had its virtues and its weaknesses. But it was a world of peace and stability for the ordinary citizen, with the prospect of gradual liberal reform of society as the years went by. He goes on to describe the first part of the destruction of that civilization by the German attempt at world conquest between 1914 and 1945. He says in terms that his book is not a personal reminiscence, but a record of the times told through his experiences. The two World Wars were really one, with a twenty year armistice in between; but Stefan Zweig did not see it like that. He became a successful writer in the 1920s, with his books being translated into many languages; and Hitler’s rise to power took him completely by surprise. When the full horror of that finally dawned on him, he was able to flee from Hitler’s power in good time; but he evidently felt he had made more than enough new-beginnings, and so he committed suicide in Brazil in August 1941. The war was not going well for the British Empire and Russia at that time; and it must have seemed to many that Germany would win. At any rate, he had had enough!

Had he lived long enough to see this catastrophe in its completeness, I suspect he would have said that the destruction of this civilization, with its sense of honour and public spirit, was a crime second only to the crucifixion of Christ. And that is certainly a tenable point of view. Without civilization and peace of a kind, nothing is possible; not even the life of the Saviour. Roman civilization was pretty cruel and brutal; but the Rule of Law was enforced, and there was a good deal of integrity. And it is really inconceivable that the Saviour should have been born, either before it matured or after it began its decline. Nor was this destruction of Europe an unfortunate and unexpected combination of political circumstances. It was a deliberate crime. The Schlieffen plan was conceived by Count Alfred von Schlieffen, when he was Chief of the German General Staff between 1891 and 1906. It was to be a repetition of Frederick the Great’s battle of Leuthen (1757) on a gigantic scale. The army in Lorraine would first hold the French, and then fall back before them; whilst the right wing would march through Luxemburg, Belgium, and Holland at Maastricht, swing round and advance West of Paris, and drive the rear of the French armies pell-mell into Germany and Switzerland. In 1906, he handed it to his successor, General Helmuth von Moltke – the younger, who fortunately was only the shadow of his uncle, and mismanaged the whole plan. But the plan involved tearing up what were then regarded as the most sacred

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treaties, and throwing the neutrality of small countries that had done Germany no harm into the waste paper basket. It was the most ruthlessly cynical plan, to destroy the conventions that had bound European nations together, for the sake of the aggrandizement of Germany; and it was filed away years before the First World War broke out. If this plan had worked, Germany would have had France at her mercy within about 6 weeks; and the opinion of Major-General JFC Fuller (a tank expert of World War I) was that at the outset the odds looked 10:1 in favour of Germany winning. From our point of view, only a miracle saved us.

How does German “War Guilt” fit in with all this? Well, Goethe put into the mouth of the Harper in Wilhelm Meister the words, “For all guilt is avenged upon earth”. If that is right, just as it will be hundreds of years before Europe fully recovers from this crime, so it will be hundreds of years before Germany expiates its guilt. Of course the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not caused by the Thirty Years War of the 17<sup>th</sup> century; but one can trace a thread between the two. After the horrors and chaos of the one, it is understandable that Frederick William the First should have built up a Prussian army to make sure it did not happen again; and having built it up, that his son should have decided to use it. And Prussia having become one of the chief powers in Europe, it is understandable that Bismarck should have spent his life making Prussia the supreme power in Europe; and in the process created a war-party which the Kaiser was unable to control. These processes take hundreds of years to mature; and it takes hundreds of years to recover from them. And it is ironic that the desire of Frederick William the First to make sure that it did not happen again, should have led, through the folly of politicians and the romanticism of philosophers, to the destruction of many German cities by Allied bombing, the brutal invasion of East Prussia by Russian forces, and the total destruction of the German State and its armed forces in 1945.

Fortunately the Allies were capable of magnanimity in Victory; and the generosity of the Marshall Plan in particular prevented the worst horrors of starvation and disease, and laid the foundation of modern European prosperity. But it does leave unanswered the question: “Does the German frame of mind absolutely preclude any interpenetration by an Anglo-Saxon mind?” Although some friends would have told me to run for my life, why did I find the Romeo and Juliet situation so intractably insoluble? I think the answer is provided indirectly by my Theory of Consciousness, which after all sprang from my experience; all our attitudes of mind may be undermined by unspoken and unconscious assumptions, which contain too much error to permit mutual understanding. So people cling to their shibboleths, in order to believe that they see things as they really are. Nor is any true understanding possible between two people, save when their unspoken assumptions are roughly comparable.

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Ours were not; and there is nothing more to be said. Germans may repress the memory of what they and their leaders did, to carry on with life. But repressing the memory, does not make it disappear from the Psyche; and it will remain there for hundreds of years.

I have been amazed, and amused, to read modern English philosophers, writing about as dry a subject as the academic theory of knowledge, declare plainly that **other peoples'** views depend on the assumptions they make; but who seem apparently unaware that **their own views** are similarly influenced. Frankly, I do not believe they were unaware; they were far too intelligent. I believe they could not contemplate the thought that their own views might be vitiated by their own false assumptions. They too had to cling to their totems or shibboleths. They could not bear to admit, even to themselves, that there were no yardsticks or signposts in the secular world, other than expediency; they feared that the moment you let go of all spiritual landmarks in this mortal world, it would be as though you had set out in a tiny boat into a wild sea, disorientated and mentally seasick. Just imagine what it would be like to have no confidence in reason or judgement; not even your own, certainly not other people's? Just imagine what it would be like to have the order we are all used to, being replaced by utter chaos! No wonder even philosophers are afraid of such a transformation. But the price you pay for your composure and peace of mind may be that your thoughts, or philosophy, are undermined by your mistaken assumptions – and false. And you can never know for sure whether that is so, or not, because you have never dared to look.

So it is I feel driven to the view that there are no yardsticks or signposts in this secular world, other than expediency. I accept too that my Theory of Consciousness only contains substantial truth, and inevitably contains error; yet even if substantially true, it prevents me holding onto the shibboleths that comfort other people. If I am right, then it is only the religions that teach the difference between right and wrong. Without a religion of some kind, the secular world may recognise the difference for a time; but the difference becomes blurred, and in the end merges into expediency, especially where wrong is cheaper. Yet heaven help us when someone who thinks, or believes, he has found faith in God, when in a position of power, translates this into practice by declaring that he is doing "The will of God". There can hardly be any worse arrogance or blasphemy, especially when it involves War. War may on occasions be necessary; but it is a necessary expedient. And as Clausewitz and every competent commander since has known, war must fought for some specific and realisable political goal. You are not doing His will by waging war; you are doing your own!