

German intellectuals in World War I

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The current revival of German militarism has won the enthusiastic support of considerable sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia and academia. Since German President Gauck proclaimed the “end of military restraint” at the beginning of the year, many journalists and academic “experts” have called for the dispatch of German soldiers to combat zones in eastern Ukraine and the Middle East. While the majority of the population rejects militarism, these academics bang the drum for war and support rearmament.

A review of the behavior of the educated elites at the time of the outbreak of World War I a hundred years ago reveals many disturbing parallels to what is taking place today.

On October 4, 1914, some two months after the outbreak of the war, there appeared what came to be known as the “Manifesto of the Ninety-Three.” [1] Ninety-three signatories, including artists and writers, attempted to justify the bloody crimes of the German forces in Belgium and glorify the war as a struggle for culture. The manifesto first appeared in German (under the title “Appeal to the Civilized World”) and then in ten translations over the following days, sparking furious responses from scientists in England and France, who published their own fierce denunciations of the “German barbarians.”

Among the signatories of the “Appeal to the Civilized World” were many outstanding scholars, such as Wilhelm Röntgen, Max Planck (who later withdrew his signature), Wilhelm Foerster, Ernst Haeckel, Paul Ehrlich and Emil Fischer. Several were Nobel Prize winners.

The declaration was also signed by famous artists such as Max Liebermann, Max Reinhardt, Engelbert Humperdinck, Gerhart Hauptmann and Max Halbe. The signatories also included the architect and precursor of the Bauhaus, Bruno Paul, expressionist poet Richard Dehmel, and Max Klinger and Maximilian Lenz, members of Gustav Klimt’s Vienna Secessionist circle.

The text had been composed in September by the playwright Ludwig Fulda and the nature poet and playwright Hermann Sudermann. It was approved by the German Imperial Naval Office and the Foreign Office.

At the time, German troops were already committing war crimes in Belgium, which Germany had invaded despite the country’s declared neutrality. German forces demolished the old town of Leuven (Louvain) together with its medieval library. They shot hostages, terrorised the civilian population and burned down villages. Some 674 civilians were murdered in the Belgian town of Dinant on August 23. In total, approximately 6,000 people were killed by the German army.

This did not prevent the manifesto’s signatories from heralding the war as a defence of culture. Mimicking the style of Martin Luther’s 95 theses, they wrote: “It is not true that our troops treated Louvain brutally. Furious inhabitants having treacherously fallen upon them in their quarters, our troops with aching hearts were obliged to fire on a part of the town as punishment.

“It is not true that our warfare does not respect international laws. It knows no undisciplined cruelty. But in the east, the earth is saturated with the blood of women and children mercilessly butchered by the wild Russian troops, and in the west, dum-dum bullets mutilate the breasts of our soldiers. Those who have allied themselves with Russians and

Serbian and present such a shameful scene to the world as inciting Mongolians and Negroes against the white race have no right whatever to call themselves upholders of civilization.”

The appeal culminated in the glorification of German militarism—“Were it not for German militarism, German civilization would long since have been extirpated”—and an invocation of the unity of the people and the army—“The German Army and the German people are one. Today this consciousness fraternizes 70,000,000 Germans, all ranks, positions, and parties being one.”

The document closes with the cynical claim that it speaks for “a civilized nation, for whom the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven and a Kant is just as sacred as its own hearths and homes.”

The appeal was the best known of many similar declarations, letters and speeches by academics. Following the Kaiser’s declaration of war, a veritable spiritual mobilisation was launched. “German artists, writers, journalists and academics were some of the most jingoistic Germans in August 1914,” writes historian Jeffrey Verhey. [2] Wolfgang Kruse stresses that “A real flood of appeals, sermons, speeches and writings on the part of theologians, poets and thinkers attempted to define the significance of the war and justify the war policies of their own nation.” [3] This was particularly the case in Germany. Ernst Piper and Volker Ullrich have given similar accounts. [4]

The “Appeal to the Civilized World” was followed less than two weeks later on October 16, 1914 by the “Declaration of University Teachers of the German Empire,” which states: “In the German army there is no other spirit than that of the German people, for both are one, and we are also a part of it.” It goes on to declare that the “very culture of Europe” depends on “the redeeming victory... for which German militarism will fight.” This declaration, initiated by Berlin classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, was signed by about 4,000 tertiary-level teachers, i.e., almost the entire teaching staff of the German Empire.

On the other hand, a pacifist counter-manifesto, titled “An Appeal to Europeans” and written by physician Georg Friedrich Nicolai in October 1914, found only three signatories among German scientists—physicist Albert Einstein, philosopher Otto Buek and astronomer Wilhelm Foerster (who had previously signed the “Appeal to the Civilized World”). It ultimately failed to achieve publication in the German language.

In the spring of 1915, Albert Einstein commented on the behavior of scholars at the beginning of the war: “Will future centuries really be able to believe of our Europe that three centuries of assiduous cultural endeavor had brought no more progress than a transition from religious madness to national madness? Even the scholars of different countries are behaving as though their cerebrums had been surgically removed eight months ago.”

The struggle for “European culture”

The pathetic appeal to a “defence of culture” served to camouflage the

promotion of German imperialist interests. This was very clearly demonstrated by the declaration of Bonn historians on September 1.

It proclaimed that Germany was called upon “to fight for the highest values of European culture” because the “principles of an intolerant Jacobinism, the self-seeking of predatory political parties and the control of political thought by an unscrupulous press” held sway in France. It charged that Russia wanted to liberate the Slavic peoples under Germanic rule and bring them under its protection, which offered only “mind-numbing, brutal and insidious despotism,” while England stood for “pure material egoism.” According to the Bonn historians, England wanted to destroy German naval and commercial power “so that the profit of world trade would fall alone to the British.”

The universities became a focus for pro-war rallies and a recruiting ground for volunteers among the students and younger teachers. This was where the ideological arguments for war were formulated. Berlin’s Friedrich Wilhelms University, the forerunner of today’s Humboldt University, distinguished itself in this respect.

The text of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s appeal of August 6, 1914, “To the People of Germany,” was drafted by Berlin theologian Adolf von Harnack together with historian Reinhold Koser. The appeal includes the infamous dictum: “I know of no political parties, only the German people.”

Among the intellectual “excellencies”—as the Berlin professors liked to be called—were theologians Ernst Troeltsch and Reinhold Seeberg, jurist Otto von Gierke, and historians Hans Delbrück, Dietrich Schäfer, Otto Hintze and Friedrich Meinecke. The latter, who in the course of the war became one of the more nominally liberal advocates of mutual peace, remarked in 1922 on the behavior of the Berlin professors (including himself) at the outbreak of war: “We are standing in the front, rather than before the front.”

Even after the horror of mass slaughter had long since extinguished the initial war euphoria, the majority of Berlin professors were still calling on the population to persevere. Thus, there appeared on July 27, 1916 the exhortative proclamation, “The Will to Victory.” [5]

The myth of the unity of the people

The much-touted “August experience” of 1914—i.e., universal enthusiasm for war—was a propaganda myth, as numerous studies now show. Even in the final days before the mobilisation, about three quarters of a million workers participated in anti-war rallies organised by the Social Democrats. The Kaiser’s declaration of war unleashed fear and shock, rather than enthusiasm, in the working class areas and the countryside.

It was only the historic betrayal of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which approved war loans and made a truce with the conservative parties on August 4, 1914, and the continuous war propaganda, which was now also being promoted by the SPD press, that influenced certain sections of workers to support the war. In contrast, the middle classes and especially the educated middle class enthusiastically welcomed the war and openly sided with the monarchy and the imperial government.

The industrial rise of Germany at the end of the nineteenth century had been accompanied by a sharp intensification of class antagonisms, and professors, school teachers, pastors and other academics felt increasingly threatened by the growing strength of the revolutionary workers’ movement. This drove the educated classes “to the right, onto the side of the old power elites, and made them ready to accept opposed ideologies such as nationalism and militarism,” writes Volker Ullrich.

The failure of the German states’ revolution of 1848 and the eventual violent unification of Germany in the German-French war of 1870-71 had

converted many former liberals into enthusiastic supporters of Otto von Bismarck.

Towards the end of the First World War, the historian Friedrich Meinecke declared in retrospect: “The university educated middle class—once on the offensive against the old ruling classes, then joined and almost merged with them to form something of a co-regency—now feels on the defensive against all the social layers created by the transition from an agricultural to an industrial state, i.e., against the broad masses of workers and employees.”

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the nobility played a leading role within military and political circles, as well as among the academic elites. Those in educated middle-class circles, who saw themselves as the “intellectual aristocracy,” tried to adapt their lifestyle to that of the nobles—from aping their clothes and allegiance to reactionary student fraternities to embracing the feudal tradition of the duel. Their militaristic mindset was accompanied by an elitist rejection of democratic demands, such as the abolition of the Prussian three-class franchise.

In 1895, the historian Friedrich Paulsen had already complained about the “inhumane arrogance” of the educated middle classes. It led them, he wrote, to promote their own superiority at the expense of those less fortunate via “the noisy, narrow-minded nationalistic conceit that parades as patriotism.”

The war propaganda promoted by today’s academic elites is likewise marked by an “inhumane arrogance.” The only difference is that they invoke “human rights” instead of “culture” to justify the return of German militarism.

However, it is not the conservatives—those die-hard fossil elements still boasting of their student fraternity dueling scars—who now stand at the head of war propaganda. Instead, the tone is set by numerous veterans of the 1968 student revolt such as the Greens’ Joschka Fischer and Ralf Fücks, who once protested against the Vietnam War, and German university professors trying to hide their Nazi past.

What remains is their class conceit—their “inhumane arrogance”—in relation to the working class. In 1968, this had its roots in a distrust of any kind of mass movement, which drew from the ideology of the Frankfurt School, or took the form of a glorification of Stalinism in the form of Maoism. Today, many of the leading lights of these movements are in the forefront of the campaign to revive German imperialist war policy.

The radical student protests of the 1960s and 1970s never challenged the capitalist foundations of bourgeois society. When the working class in France and other countries joined the revolutionary struggles, the students ended their protest and integrated themselves into mainstream society. The underlying class character of their current hysterical war campaign is the same as it was a hundred years ago: hostility to the working class, which they feel threatens their privileged position, and subordination to the imperialist interests of the ruling class.

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Notes

[1] Manifesto of the 93 at: http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Manifesto_of_the_Ninety-Three_German_Intellectuals

[2] Jeffrey Verhey: *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany*, CUP 2000

[3] Wolfgang Kruse: *Eine Welt von Feinden. Der Große Krieg 1914-1918*, Frankfurt a.M. 1997

[4] Ernst Piper: *Nacht über Europa*, Berlin 2013; Volker Ullrich: *Die nervöse Großmacht 1871-1918*, Frankfurt a.M., 1997, 2013

[5] Quote from *Aufrufe und Reden deutscher Professoren im Ersten*



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