The crisis facing Germany

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The wonder of the German Reich in the year 1930 is, not that it is functioning under extreme difficulties, but that it is functioning at all. Few great modern states have embarked on the sea of Democracy less fully prepared for such an undertaking than Germany, and few states have been beset with hindrances so great or initial problems of such intricacy. England in the period of comparative tranquility in her domestic affairs, required somewhat in excess of ninety years to develop the English representative democracy known to us today. France had enjoyed considerable experience (not all of it pleasant, however) under two republics before she resigned herself to a third. America, the most favored of the children of Democracy, had enjoyed representative institutions and a comparatively wide franchise long before the fathers of the Constitution made the thirteen colonies a nation in 1789.

Germany, on the other hand, crossed the chasm between the imperial state of 1918 and the republic of 1919 in one leap. It is true that Germany enjoyed representative institutions before the formation of the republic; but the influence of those institutions is admitted negligible in comparison to the bureaucratic control which made Germany if not the most popularly administered, then certainly one of the most efficiently governed countries in modern Europe.

The point here to be insisted upon, then, is that fifty years of empire, several centuries of Bündnis, together with ages of monarchy, are scarcely the type of political experience from which we should expect Republicanism to step full-blown. The imaginations of many citizens of the republic in 1930 are colored memories of the Alte Drei, Bismarck, William I, and Moltke, whose statesmanship made Germany great. There is a strong desire among considerable numbers of the educated class for a "strong man;" not necessarily a man on horseback, but one who would be able to show those qualities of determined leadership which a considerable section of the German people believe to be absent at the present time. The conciliatory policy of a Stresemann is not enough. Something more than conciliation is needed with which to face the problems presented by a peace enforced by twenty-six nations.

It would be difficult to estimate how the educated section desires of strong leadership voted in the election of September 14. There is good reason for believing, however, that a considerable number supported the Center or Conservative parties. It is hardly probable that they were swept along with the 6,500,000 who voted for Herr Hitler's party, the National Socialists; for the often repeated comment on the Nazi leader, "Er weiss nicht was er will," was scarcely an exclamation of approbation. However they voted, it is now certain that conservatism in Germany has suffered such a set-back as will require some time for its recovery.

The rise of Fascist (National Socialist) representation in the Reichstag as a result of the September election from twelve to one hundred seven is again illustrative of the conflict between sentiment favoring constitutional republicanism and those favoring something stronger. Just what this "something stronger" amounts to must wait on a positive declaration of policy from Herr Hitler. Although it is unsafe to assert, as many who oppose him have asserted, that he and his party favor the subversion of the present constitution, it is fair to say that the present methods of getting things done in the Reich are not to his liking, and that the strong resemblance his party bears to that of Mussolini suggests later developments of far-reaching importance. The comment of the London Times is interesting:

It is difficult to say precisely what this party wants apart from its sturdy nationalism, because of the extraordinary complexity of the language of its manifestos, which are full of abuse of the "Marxist-Plutocratic Democratic state" and so on. It does want power, but there is no guide to what it would like to do if it gained power, except that it undoubtedly wants to make Germany strong, if not warlike.

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that at the time of this writing, three young reichwehr officers are being tried for alleged attempts to bring a section of Germany's armed forces over to Fascism so long ago as 1929.

Another element of opposition to republicanism as it may easily be discerned in the Communist party, which as a result of the recent election gained greatly in representative strength in the Reichstag. This party now claims seventy-six representatives, as against fifty-six in the last Reichstag. A German friend whose accuracy I have reason to respect pointed out to me that the coming Reichstag will have within it nearly 200 representatives, who, if they have not declared themselves in favor of the state's immediate extinction, cannot on the other hand be said to be strictly in favor of its maintenance under republicanism.

The lure of the party of the extreme left, the Communist, like that of the extreme right, Fascist, has been made even more attractive by discontent. There are thousands of unemployed workers, and more thousands of under-paid employees, in Germany today whose lot is so hard that they would gladly change it, even if the change meant also a change in the form of government. I do not mean by this that there is a considerable body of population expressly dedicated to the task of subverting the government. I mean that some theories seem more attractive than others to them, and that if concrete evidence of improvement to come is presented to them they are likely to be in a receptive mood. Few people in America today including summer tourists, have any conception of the difficult situation of the German people. Poverty and wretchedness are not easily to be discerned on the streets of German cities; for an understanding of these, one must go into the homes of a proud and energetic people. "The misery of our people is known only to themselves," a noted German professor, once well-known in America, recently said to me. The pfennig economy of once prosperous and distinguished families, the burdensome taxes, the misery of the unemployed and
poorly paid are in the most important sense afflictions of the soul, as well as of the body.

An impatient foreign opinion, harking back to the days of the war, will look upon this picture as a logical, if not a just, payment for the privilege of embroiling the world in four years of conflict. I do not propose here to settle the question of world war guilt, but I do wish to assert that it should be clear to all who lost the war. Germany has suffered two catastrophes in her long history; one was the Thirty Years war, and the other was the peace of Versailles. Figures seldom make an appeal to the imagination, but when it is said that the reparations payments required of Germany totaled 170,000,000,000 gold marks, five billion dollars more than it cost us to fight the war and provide ten billions to needy allies; that Germany has the stupendous sum of 113,905,000,000 marks to pay within the next thirty-seven years under the Young plan; that reparation payments alone take from her national resources each year a sum in excess of $450,000,000, some idea of the magnitude of Germany's task should make itself apparent to secure Americans.

As it was said in the beginning, the wonder of 1930 is not that representative government in Germany is working with difficulty, but that it is working at all. Few new governments have been faced with such fiscal problems as indicated above. Even governments, furthermore, have had the task of sustaining an unemployed population of two and a half million. The question which presents itself to the student of modern democracies is, How does this nation, suffering no less than others from world depression, bear up under the burdens placed upon it? The facts of the situation make the suggestion of the Manchester Guardian, "Whether Germany has learnt the bitter lesson that representative government can only work if the elector is prepared to take the rough with the smooth and in times of economic crisis to put his hand deeply into his own pocket in order to save the national finances," a trifle impertinent. The habit of living hand to mouth progresses well enough until the mouth fails to get its proper share.

A people which surveys its economic maladies thus, and sees no prospects of immediate remedy from a political party warfare, the main characteristic of which is two ends pitted against the middle, is apt to turn to extraordinary means of self-help. There have been opinions which favored the repudiation of the Young plan; others looked to the finding of a "strong man," who might, constitutionally or otherwise, present the case of a united Germany to a world which for twelve years has been too busy or too selfish to hear still others have favored such alliances as would bring strength for urging the case of Germany. With regard to the latter, it may be said that the antipathies which have revealed themselves in the past year in Europe make it seems apparent that realignments of power, of tremendous importance to the next five years, are taking place. What will be the place of Germany in these?

It might be gathered from what has been said before that republicanism is inadequate to the tasks set before it. In answer to this, it should be said that in addition to fiscal problems difficult enough for even the best governments to solve, and a tradition of radically different political control, republicanism in Germany is suffering from disintegrating forces of the type which more than once threatened the free institutions of France. Public opinion in Germany refuses to divide itself between two political parties as in the United States, where they have been likened to two empty whisky bottles, each bearing a different label. Political strength is dispersed over the wide area now shared by some thirty parties; and for the liberty of indulging himself in the fine distinction between one and another, the voter pays the price of coalition, i.e. unstable government. Furthermore, local party organizations do not merge nicely into the national party fabric. There is a fine, but seemingly real, distinction between the Bayerische Volksphasei and the Centrum to which it nominally adheres. There is a vast difference between a National Socialist and a Social Democrat. And so men vote, and in voting delicate preferences add one more to the multitudinous problems of the most sorely put democracy in Europe.

But if the difficulties of German democracy bulk large, there are also some achievements on the positive side during the past twelve years which merit attention. Germany passed through a disastrous inflation in 1922, the practical effect of which was to reduce millionaires to paupers in a day. The country bore its misfortune with a dignity which may well excite the admiration of all nations. It has not recovered from this disaster, but it has weathered it and has stabilized its finances—that ranks the event on the positive side. The country successfully resisted the Kapp Putsch engineered by Herr Hitler and General Ludendorf in 1923, and republicanism has since on many occasions resisted subversive propaganda. Germany has met its obligations (not without the advice and help of such experts as Dawes and Young, it is to be admitted) with a surprising degree of success. To have retired 56,000,000,000 marks worth of reparations payments by 1930 is a creditable achievement indeed.

The people have learned steadily and well in the democratic school of experience during the past twelve years. In spite of its regrettable tendency to dispersion, the vote is being used. The total votes registered for the election in September were 34,942,854, nearly as great as the number cast in the United States presidential election of 1928, by a nation half as large. The franchise here has brought what Lord Bryce complained is too often absent; the desire to use it.

From this brief survey of Germany at a critical period in her republican history, it may be concluded that the elements most necessary to her success are the favoring winds of world economic recovery, a greater cohesion in the political party structure, and forbearance on the part of those who have for twelve years strictly defined the course of the young Republic's progress. Given these, Germany has within her the power to go steadily in the direction which leads away from the disasters of 1914 to 1922.