

On the other hand, it is also true that this civilization *makes possible* more than any previous human constellation: a life without violence and with far-reaching equality of opportunity. Not in the sense that this goal would anywhere be actual, but humans have never before found the means of struggle with external misery, with lack and want, which this civilization offers. Not that this struggle with external want could be resolved by those social ways and exclusive means which the age offers. Even the struggle with *outer* need is an inner struggle. The chief possibility, however, which emerges for the first time in history with our civilization, is the *possibility* of a turn from accidental rule to the rule of those who understand what history is about. It would be a tragic *guilt* (not a misfortune) of the intelligentsia if it failed to comprehend and grasp this opportunity. History is nothing other than the shaken certitude of pre-given meaning. It has no other meaning or goal. For the bad infinity of the precarious human existence in the world, however, complicated today by a global emergence of the masses, accustomed to flattery and escalating their expectations, such a goal and meaning will largely do to make them facile victims of manipulative demagogues.

The second main reason why the technological civilization cannot be simply labeled decadent is that the manifestations of decadence which we have noted and described in it are not simply its own work but a bequest of preceding ages out of whose spiritual problems and themes it made up its dominant matrix. Our sketch of the rise of the modern age and of its fundamental metaphysical character was intended to show as much. Modern civilization suffers not only from its own flaws and myopia but also from the failure to resolve the entire problem of history. Yet the problem of history may not be resolved, it must be preserved as a problem. Today the danger is that knowing so many particulars we are losing the ability to see the questions and that which is their foundation.

Perhaps the entire question about the decadence of civilization is incorrectly posed. There is no civilization as such. The question is whether historical humans are still willing to embrace history.

Sixth Essay: Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War

The first world war provoked a whole range of explanations among us, reflecting the effort of humans to comprehend this immense event, transcending any individual, carried out by humans and yet transcending humankind—a process in some sense cosmic. We sought to fit it into our categories, to come to terms with it as best we could—that is, basically, in terms of nineteenth-century ideas. The second world war provoked nothing of the sort; its direct causes and the course it took were (apparently) only too clear and, most of all, it did not end, mutating instead into something peculiar which looks neither quite like war nor quite like peace, and the revolution which in a way commented on this state did not let anyone catch their breath to speak the word which would “define each thing according to its essence and would tell us about the state of the matter.” Besides, a sort of a conviction spread among us that there must be some true, that is Marxist, explanation of the second world war, something hidden in the conceptual treasures of the Party which guides the movement of history. No one seemed to mind that in reality there are no such explanations . . .

It is not the task of these lines to provide a critique of the specific formulae forged to account for the first world war. I

would rather point out that all of them, whether they spoke of the conflict of the Slavs and Germans, of an imperialist conflict growing out of the final stage of capitalism, of the result of exaggerated modern subjectivism seeking a violent objectification, or perhaps of a conflict between democracy and theocracy, shared one trait in common: all approached war from the perspective of peace, day, and life, excluding its dark nocturnal side. From this perspective, life, especially historical life, appears as a continuum within which individuals function as the bearers of a general movement which alone matters; death means a change in functions; and war, death organized en masse, is an unpleasant but necessary interlude which we need to accept in the interest of certain goals of life's continuity but in which we can seek nothing "positive." At most, as Hegel said (and Dostoyevsky repeated), it can serve as one of the salutary tremors that civic life needs lest it become sclerotic and fall asleep in its routine. However, the idea that war itself might be something that can explain, that has itself the power of bestowing meaning, is an idea foreign to all philosophies of history and so also to all the explanations of the world war we know.

The explanations of the war of 1914-1918 were always constructed with the help of nineteenth-century ideas, but those are ideas of the day with its interests, ideas of peace. It is not surprising that they proved incapable of explaining the fundamental phenomenon of the twentieth century, so different since that century is an epoch of the night, of war, and of death. Not that we would not need to refer to its antecedents in seeking to understand it. Such antecedent ideas, programs, and goals, however, can only explain the origin of that awesome will which for years drove millions of humans into a fiery furnace and other countless millions into preparations, gigantic and unending, for this monumental *auto-da-fé*. They are no use in explaining the intrinsic content of this century and its deep addiction to war.

As with all European wars, so also the war of 1914-1918 had as its background a definite general human conviction striving violently to manifest itself, to be acted out. This, too,

was an ideological war, though its idea, inconspicuous in its negativity, is hard to locate. Wars such as Napoleon's were still rooted in revolutionary ideas, reflecting the Enlightenment in a special, militarily technicized mode, and the Enlightenment was the common conceptual property of the time as well as a global conviction, the positive idea that the world is ruled by reason. Just as the Thirty Years' War was marked by the common conviction that the split within western Christendom must be definitively resolved, and just as the crusades rested on the conviction of the superiority of western Christianity, based in its inner truthfulness. The shared idea in the background of the first world war was the slowly germinating conviction that there is nothing such as a factual, objective meaning of the world and of things, and that it is up to strength and power to create such meaning within the realm accessible to humans. The preparation for war proceeded in this spirit; the will to preserve the status quo on the one hand, the will to transform it radically on the other. Understandably, derivatives of other, older convictions of Christian origins were also present, democratic ideas of the Enlightenment on the one hand, theocratic-hierarchical ideas on the other; yet when we look at the state of affairs realistically, noting that the democratic states of Europe were also the most vigorous representatives of Europe's imperial idea, their claims to democracy begin to appear as components in their defense of the global status quo. That stands out most clearly in their alliance with the most endangered member of the imperial status quo of the time, which was, naturally, czarist Russia. In any case, it was not for such derivatives that humans went to do battle, those tended far more to affect the unfolding of the course of events and the intensity of the will manifest in them. Only with the entry of America and of the socialist revolution into the course of the war did there appear, on the side both of the Allies and of the opposition, forces opposed to the status quo in whose name the war ended and, by its inconclusive ending laid the foundations for new or renewed conflicts.

In this respect it is important that, if we think of the process of the war and of the will that led to its unexpectedly long

duration in this, the only realistic way, then the side that fought against the status quo and so, appearances to the contrary, must justly be called revolutionary, is Germany after Bismarck. Despite all appearance to the contrary: is this configuration, led by conservative Prussia and its military caste, with its ossified bureaucracy, its incredibly narrow-minded Lutheran orthodoxy, a revolutionary element, the bearer and agent of world revolution? Do not all the facts speak against it, including the social history of the war? If we were impressed by the common conception of revolution, accepted primarily in economic and social theories, in historical materialism, in the socialism of the nineteenth century, which itself understood revolution politically and modeled it after the revolutions of the eighteenth century (notably the French, less so the American), then this thesis could be nothing but a forced paradox. Yet of all the peoples of the world (except for the United States), this Germany, for all its traditional structures, is the configuration that most closely approximated the reality of the new technological age. Even its conservatism basically served a discipline that, contemptuous of equalization and democratization, vehemently and ruthlessly pursued the accumulation of building, organizing, transforming energy. Ernst Jünger's *Der Arbeiter* contains an implicit suspicion of the actual revolutionary nature of the old prewar Germany.¹ It is above all the ever deepening technoscientific aspect of its life. It is the organizing will of its economic leaders, its technocratic representatives forging plans leading inevitably to a conflict with the existing global order. These flow quite naturally into a definite historically prepared mold—did not the war of 1870 show that what had hitherto been the center of western Europe, France, was no longer capable of fulfilling the role of the state unifying the heritage of the Roman West, that Austria, the last vestige of the old empire, could easily fall prey to such plans and that the “continent of Europe” was in this perspective an obsolete political concept?² Thus it came quite naturally to seem that this imperial Germany was traditionalistic, merely reviving the claims of the old empire on the new basis of that nationalism which

sustained the war of 1870–1871. Its internal opposition, the socialists, equally naturally saw in it a hotbed of greedy capitalist magnates, subsequently the typical representative of global capitalist imperialism bent on seizing all the riches of the globe and all its productive forces. In reality, they themselves collaborated in organizing the new society of work, discipline, production, and planned construction leading in all respects to the releasing of ever further stores of energy. Long before the war, this Germany had already transformed Europe into an energetic complex. For all the intelligence with which other European countries, France especially, moved in the same direction, their transformation in this respect was more gradual, humanized by their desire for individual life, a tendency which Sieburg captured in his *Gott in Frankreich* still long after the war.³ The conservative structures of prewar Germany provided a great service in this respect, helping bring the transformation about in a disciplined manner, without great upheavals, so that the masses yielded to it, for all the gnashing of teeth among political leaders, indeed, the political organization of the workers by party bureaucracy soon fell into the same rut and moved in the same direction. The revolution taking place here had its deep driving force in the conspicuous scientificism which all prewar experts on Europe and on Germany saw as the chief trait of its life: a scientificism which understood science as technology, actually a positivism, which for the most part managed to neutralize even those traditions surviving from the Germany of the first half of the century, the Germany of the fading old empire, traditions of history, theology, philosophy, or even managed to couple them to this new locomotive.

Appearances again to the contrary, the Achilles' heel of this entire effort was its military machine. It was also well on the way toward a managerial mode of work and thought, though here a great deal stood in the way. There was the fascination with tradition and its concepts, schemata, goals. On the one hand there was a great sturdiness and persistence, on the other a domineering rudeness and a total absence of imagination. The war was conducted mechanically, victory won by

