

PHILOSOPHER SCAPEGOATS

A Successor to Nietzsche?

SOME years ago there appeared in an Australian periodical a photograph of the German philosopher Nietzsche, under which was the following caption: "Nietzsche, whose obscene adoration of the will drove him mad and his idolising country bad."

That was 10 years after the war, but still the myth persisted that this lonely German philosopher-poet, a prophet without much honour in his own or any other country, was the guiding star of Prussian rapacity. Exactly how the myth started it would be hard to say, but at a time when the whole of modern German philosophy was the subject of heated debate it was not a difficult matter to connect Nietzsche's emphasis on the will to power as one of the most valuable instincts in man, and his glorifying of war as a purifier of humanity, with the horrors of the Belgian invasion.

The "discovery" that what the Allies were really up against was Nietzsche was at first a great success, says Clive Bell in his essay on Civilisation. "Nietzsche became the butt of the high, outrageous mettle of every one of us. That he was German and a poet sufficed to put him in the wrong with the ruling class, and that he was said

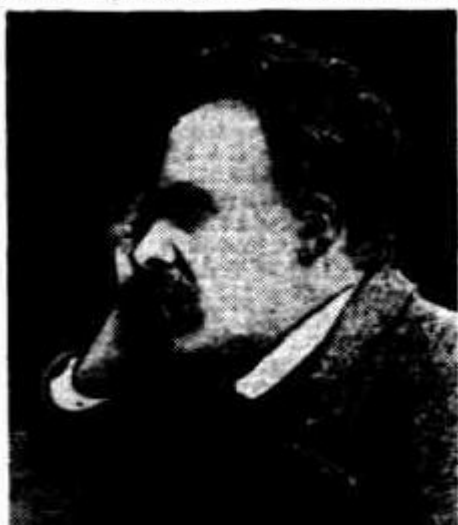


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to have despised mediocrity gave the middle and the lower grounds for disliking him. Down with Nietzsche! Ah, that was fun. . . And were anyone who had so compromised himself in German literature to call our scholarship in question we called him a traitor and shut him up."

However, the plain fact was, as a few of the more sober-minded tried to point out at the time, that Nietzsche hated and despised the German people along with their culture, and was essentially international in his outlook. True, there could be no escaping the fact that he praised war, but the virtue in war was that it ennobled individuals, not that it was the instrument whereby an arrogant nation might inflate its power. With several nations now immersed in a spirit of fierce nationalism, which also preaches the ennobling qualities of war, this distinction may be a little difficult to make. It will only be understood by some understanding of the life and mind of a man whose poetry and thought stamp him as one of the great individualists of the 19th century.

Nietzsche died in the first year of the new century at the age of 56. As a result of a breakdown in 1889 his mind was permanently impaired, and the last eleven years of his life were passed in a pathetic state of mental feebleness. But the writings by which he is known were produced before insanity came on. His were certainly not the works of a madman, as is sometimes airily alleged, but nevertheless they were produced under conditions of severe mental and physical stress, which played a large part in shaping



of severe mental and physical stress, which played a large part in shaping what he wrote. Even at the age of 24, when he was appointed to the chair of classical philology at Basle, he complained of severe ill-health, which caused his retirement ten years later. For ten more years, while fighting against acute pain and sickness, he produced his brilliant philosophical essays, in which he hurled one of the strongest protests ever made against the tendency for mankind to live comfortably and take things easily. In part it was the protest of a sick man, to whom a comfortable life had been denied; in part it was a vehement rejection of the current attitude towards life in which, he held, the instinct for self-preservation triumphed over the will to power. It was in the will to power that he saw the vitalising spark of life and civilisation. From this followed his cold rejection of Christianity and all it stood for; his contempt for liberals and democrats; his enthroning of a race of spiritual aristocrats, strong, cultured and self-willed; and his lyrical praise of war. He felt his own suffering to be the means of spiritual triumph, and therefore that suffering was also necessary for man. Far in the future he saw the emergence of the Superman, a strange god-like being, in whom all was instinctive, and who would be the creator of new values beyond our comprehension. Nietzsche, indeed, placed great value on the instincts, and in his terrible message clearly pronounced the doom of intellectualism and rationalism.

In his brilliant work, "Thus Spake Zarathustra," Nietzsche shows himself influenced by ideas arising from Darwinism, which is the background of the Superman. Zarathustra, the prophet, comes down from the mountain and addresses the people in the market-place: "I teach you the Superman. Man is something to be surpassed. All beings have hitherto created something beyond themselves; and ye . . . would rather go back to the beast than surpass man. . . . What is the ape to man? A laughing stock, a thing of shame. And just the same shall man be to the Superman."

Enough has been said of Nietzsche and his philosophy to disconnect it from the economic imperialism of the old German empire. It was a far-seeing philosophy, essentially idealistic, which showed profound psychological insight, and had no message concerning the benefits of German culture. Nietzsche's aristocrats were Eu-

ropeans, not Junkers. He loathed the Prussian system, and wrote with the deep bitterness of a man who had good reason to feel that his worth had won no recognition from his own countrymen: "It is part of my ambition to be looked on as the despiser of the Germans, par excellence." Many followers he certainly had, but these he rejected as being out of touch with the real meaning of his message. "I am alone, absurdly alone," he wrote to Baron von Seydlitz just before his breakdown, "and in my unrelenting war on all that mankind has hitherto honoured and loved I myself seem to have become something . . . concealed that can no longer be found."

And this is the man who was popularly supposed to have carried the banner for warring Germany!

The irony and injustice of Nietzsche's resurrection for a posthumous crucifixion might well be forgotten were it not for the fact that it teaches a lesson which, apparently, has not yet been

learnt. Again there are indications of a search for a philosopher scapegoat.

At the time when Nietzsche was being so roundly condemned during the last war, criticisms were directed against German philosophy in general, and would-be patriots did their best to discredit most of German idealistic thought, in which the names of Kant, Fichte and Hegel hold places of high honour. And today there seems to be a tendency towards a repetition of this folly, with Hegel as the arch-enemy. Hegel, by his insistence on the State as the Divine Idea as it exists on earth, his close connection with the foundation of modern Germany, and by his influence on Marx, the high-priest of Communism, seems altogether too good a mark, and several recent writers have darkly hinted that the figure of Hegel stands in sinister fashion behind all the present uncertainty. Such statements, however, again do a grave injustice.

It has been well observed that there is something of the State official about the Prussian professor. Hegel is an apt illustration. His appointment in 1818 to the chair formerly occupied by Fichte at the Berlin University—that

to the chair formerly occupied by Fichte at the Berlin University—"that conservatoire of the German soul"—was a sort of official endorsement of his philosophy. "His main influence on the Berliners," writes his biographer, "was that he formally put them to school, and with naive inflexibility made them learn his system." And what was that system as it applied to social organisation? Hegel agrees with Aristotle that the State comes before the individual, and that it is only through the State that the individual can reach his fullest development; but on the other hand he strikes the modern note in defining the State in terms of freedom and spirit. Force is indispensable to progress, but the State is not founded on force, but on the disposition and will of the governed. Neither is force the end of the State. Its abiding purpose is the good life. His philosophy is essentially rooted in the idea of freedom, even though he insists that real freedom is only possible through discipline, and when the government set out to pursue a reactionary and repressive policy it quickly found "perilous stuff" in Hegel's thought. It was he who said of Napoleon that he "had brought the highest genius to victory, only to show how little victory could achieve" against the moral forces of the world.

Hegel's great love for the German people, whom he linked with the ancient Greeks as the leaders of their



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age, should not lead us to associate his name with the reaction from his thought and the degeneracy of German political conceptions after his death in 1831, when increased stress was laid on certain aspects of his theories to the exclusion of others. Modern Germany may be said to have had a sober youth, absorbed in speculation, while other nations were stealing a march on her in the exploitation of the modern world; but the reaction from the sobriety of her youth was sudden and violent. Already in the thirties it was clear that a new industrial and commercial era had dawned, thrusting a new class of people into prominence and leadership, and as the movement gathered momentum the intellectual resources of the nation were absorbed in the physical sciences. Materialistic dogmas took the place of the old idealism as the background of thought of the governing classes.

On the flood-tide of this new materialism rode a number of writers, teachers and philosophers of small stature who were ready to accommodate the new viewpoint, some giving currency to the philosophy of power in its barest and most cynical form. In this period four figures stand out. On the one side we have Schopenhauer the pessimist, and Nietzsche, with his iconoclasm and essential idealism, moving out from the main stream; on the other the chauvinist historian Treitschke and Haeckel, the biologist-philosopher, moving swiftly along with it. Treitschke, who was appointed to the chair of history in Berlin in 1874, knew himself to be "a thousand times more patriot than historian," and taught that God had led the Germans to their present exalted station under Prussia and the Hohenzollerns—"those great princes, who in German worth and uprightness are unexampled in the dynasties of Europe and the world." His narrow Germanism and disdain of England and France suited the growing mood. All history was to him a means of enforcing the lesson that Germany was to dominate Europe, and he eloquently recommended war as a means of her enlargement. During the 15 years of his popularity in Berlin, his influence was immense. Haeckel, the populariser of the Darwinian



his influence was immense. Haeckel, the populariser of the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest, also chimed in with the aggressive clamour. He found, to the great satisfaction of Germans, that it gave sanction for resisting Britain and France in the race for colonies.

Not Hegel's theories, then, but a new and sordid materialism, gave rise to the Germany whose menacing jingoism aroused British fears and suspicions in the years before 1914.

It is certainly true that Hegel's doctrines have had an extremely wide influence on the contemporary world, but chiefly in a transmuted or corrupted form. His connection with the canonical writings of Communism is only superficial, since Marx substituted for his view of history as a battle of ideas one which envisaged it as a battle of economic forces—again a materialist conception. Though Nazi Germany is in many ways a continuation of the old Germany which Hegel helped to mould, it is a continuation—perhaps we should say marked degeneration—of the less creditable features that arose after his death. Hegelian influence, at one or two removes, has had its influence on the making of the Italian State, having filtered through Syndicalist by-paths to the ears of Il Duce when he was nothing more than a political scamp. Hegel's purer conceptions, however, seem largely to have evaporated, leaving—to which Nazi Germany is chief witness—a full measure of dull and decaying dross.—E.R.J.