

# CONVERSATIONS IN GERMANY

## A Prisoner Among Political Infants

THE author of this article, which we reprint from the "Christian Science Monitor," spent 3½ years as a prisoner of war in Germany. He is A. G. Brooks, a man from Manchester, and writes with the bewilderment of most people who have talked about democracy in Central Europe.

NO British prisoner of war liked to feel that he was out of the fight and unable to oppose the evil of Nazism. He believed that there, in the heart of Germany, in daily contact with the ripest products of the Nazi regime, he was still prosecuting the war, still defending the values which are his heritage as an Englishman.

This he was able to do in many ways, but chiefly by conversation. The guards were usually ready to talk with you, for like the citizens of all countries, they enjoyed that sense of superiority and friendly condescension when they met one who is learning their language. Nothing pleased them better than to be asked the meaning of a phrase read in a German book or newspaper, and they were delighted when they could correct you in pronunciation or usage. These questions of grammar and language were the prelude (as they were intended to be) to many long conversations on the war, politics, and economics.

THE fact which stood out like a mountain in hundreds of talks with them was their political infancy. It never failed to astonish and dismay me to find that men, otherwise cultured and intelligent, could be so pathetically infantile in their talk about government and politics.

There was one guard who used to say every time we talked together: "You Grossbritannien, own one quarter of the earth; why do you object to us having Europe?" And always I would go over the same weary ground, hoping that perhaps this time he would understand. I explained that we did not "own" a quarter of the earth, that a large part of the British Empire consisted of Canada, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, all of which were Dominions and self-governing. It was useless. The idea in his mind for the word "Empire" was of millions of subjugated people and vast tracts of rich territory, all owned lock, stock, and barrel, by Great Britain. He was no nearer understanding the term "self-governing" when I left him than when I first met him.

VERY few of the Germans I spoke with realise that there are ethics of government for which men, if need be, are prepared to risk death. They seem only impressed by the power of government and are unaware that there can be spiritual values attached to it which some men hold very dear. One day an Under-Officer of the camp who came from Saxony joined in a conversation and said with great earnestness to me: "You—a Saxon, me—a Saxon; why do we fight?" I hoped for a moment that here at last was a German to build

the new Germany on; but when he followed this with the stock stuff about only the Jewish plutocrats and the Bolsheviks wanting the war, my admiration abated; and when he ended by saying, "Look! Deutschland, Grossbritannien and Amerika, together we could rule the world. No more war!" I saw that power without principle was his conception of government, too.

The third thing I learned—it is an odd aspect of German mentality, and the reason for much of their belligerence—is that they suffer from a sense of inferiority. The German reveals it in little ways, totally unaware that he is doing so, and shows by his questions about England, that for all his worship of power, he looks up to her as the possessor of something Germany has not got. We would be talking together and then suddenly a voice would ask, naively as a little child might: "How big is London?" I replied: "Oh, over eight million population," and the guard who had asked protested, with some awe in his tone: "Oh, no, it cannot be, no place can be so big; why, Berlin is only four and a-half million."

Some of the less educated have this sense of inferiority falsely, for they have exaggerated ideas of the ordinary Englishman's income and way of life. I told them on one occasion what I did in peacetime and how much a week I was paid. They were amazed, being apparently under the impression that every Englishman earned about £15 a week, drove his own motor-car, and lived in a luxurious house.

LOOKING back on my contact with Germans of all kinds, I try to sum up my impressions. I would say that the economic reasons for German aggression are quite subsidiary. The first cause is that they worship power without regard to ethics; the second that politically they are children, with an under-developed political backbone, making them incapable of resisting any evil government which seizes power; the third is envy arising from a sense of inferiority.

From this the outlook seems hopeless. But I do not believe the German is incorrigibly wicked or inevitably aggressive. Having lived long years with them in the unfavourable relationship of captive and captor, I am no teacher in the "only good German being a dead one" school. Europe is a house, and Germany a small boy in it, a violent youngster carrying dangerous weapons. He will grow up, but meantime the politically adult will have to take his weapons away, for the house cannot be rebuilt every twenty years. But Europe is the house, not Britain, France, or Russia, and Europeans live there. And whether we like it or not, geography has decreed that Germany shall be one of its cornerstones.

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