



THE ROAD TO DISASTER

A European's View Of Tragic Europe



THE ROAD TO DISASTER, by Ernst Klein. George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 332 pp., with an index. 12/6 published price.

ERNST KLEIN is something new in journalistic authors. And his book is something new, for us, in contemporary history. Our Gedyes, Mowrers, Reeds, and the rest, have given us what has been more or less an intensification of our own points of view.

Klein is different. His journalistic experience covers this whole cataclysmic quarter-century. And it was all gained in the centre of Europe. He writes about Europe essentially as a European and, luckily he has written about Central Europe for us on the perimeter.

"Road to Disaster" is just about the clearest layman's guide to Central European history since this twentieth century phase of it began. That is its greatest virtue. The next is its point of view.

We are inclined to regard World War I. as essentially our own affair, between us and France on the one hand, and Germany on the other; with Russians, and Austrians, Poles, Hungarians, Rumanians, Slavs, Greeks, Turks, and Italians inconsequentially mixed up in the background.

But for Ernst Klein it was these peoples who were the war. They started it. But we finished it.

He blames us for our failure to realise the importance of his Central Europe before the war and for failing after the war at St. Germain and Neuilly and Versailles to realise that Central Europe needed a pivotal point which we removed when we removed Austria.

Between the Two

There is really only that one milestone in his road to disaster—Austria. As an Austrian, he labours the point with some bias. And yet his book generally is fair comment. His theories are documented.

He talks of Central Europe and the Balkans as being in a state of flux between Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism. For centuries Austria provided the necessary cushion. Klein writes with respect and affection for the Hapsburgs that Benes and other leaders of small-state independence movements hated so much. He puts the different point of view—the point of view of the patriotic Austrian who loved Austria and hated Germany. When his book reaches the beginnings of War I., after tallying Balkan history (in which the author had an intimate part), he says of Austria-Hungary under the Hapsburgs:

Russia was the Trouble

"In the history books of the Entente it is demonstrated that Austria-Hungary wanted war. The ultimatum to Serbia,

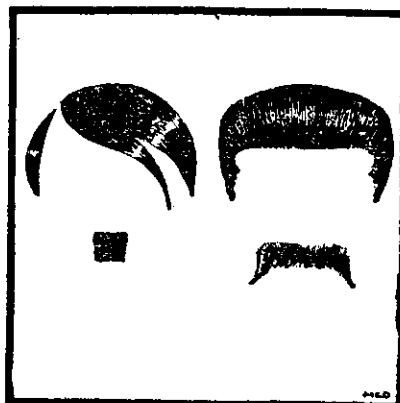
The reviewer of the book discussed on this page suggests that it will provide for many lay readers a new view of the history of Europe in the twentieth century. The disaster has come. Ernst Klein presents the other man's idea of the road that led to it.

it is alleged, was so worded that it would have been impossible for a sovereign state to accept it. . . .

"Austria-Hungary wanted no war of conquest. Hungary was against any increase in the Slav population.

"Count Tisza . . . maintained that the ultimatum should not be drawn in a manner which made it unacceptable to Serbia. He made modifications in it again and again.

"The ultimatum was not unacceptable. From my own personal knowledge I am in a position to state that Serbia was ready to accept it. Serbia rejected the ultimatum in the end because she was instigated by Russia to do so. Pan-Slavism thought itself strong enough to



"A cushion is necessary between the two"

deal the decisive blow again Austria. And with that Pan-Germanism was called into play. . . .

Then the war, and two or three extraordinary chapters on the relations between the Austrian and German staffs, with every possible opportunity taken to compare the Austria of those times with the Germany of Hitler.

The Danube Basin

Klein comes back again and again to his central theme that the Danube Basin must be made a strong, separate entity:

"Although the British Government hesitates to state its peace aims at this time, one necessity must not be left out: the most important condition for peace is the reconstruction of the Danube Basin. A greater body should be built up and consolidated. . . . The Danube is Europe's River of Destiny."

As often as he emphasises this point, Klein emphasises that the Western democracies have failed to understand it. His best point is that Austria fell to Hitler because the democracies did not understand its importance while Hitler did. Benes did not understand it either, but Hitler did, and Benes disappeared with his Czecho-Slovakia when Hitler went in to cover his flank from Vienna.

That is the simple theme of the whole interesting book, but Klein, if we may accept the account he gives of himself, is a more than usually interesting personality.

He seemed to have a hand in all the important happenings of his time. He acted as go-between for shy diplomats. He knew the inside story.

He uses intimate knowledge of the circumstance to describe the Austrian Emperor's attempt to bring about peace in 1917. Here he starts his refrain about the hatred of the French. Then it was "The Tiger," Clemenceau, who won the war for France by teaching the Frenchman how to hate. But Klein himself is no hater. He is that astonishing person (for us): the European who sees the other point of view.

His comments on the peace treaties give us his point of view:

Tragic Halfness

"The peace which was finally constructed was a compromise—not between the Allies and the Central Powers, but between the Allies themselves. It was neither a peace of reconciliation nor a peace of destruction, as Clemenceau wanted it to be. But President Wilson, the idealist, thought he could rebuild the world on the lines of the new order as he saw it. The result was a tragic halfness.

"Germany remained on the whole intact, and Austria was torn to pieces. . . . The liberation of hitherto oppressed peoples was strengthened by surrendering others to even heavier oppressions.

"Three and a-half million Hungarians and half a million Ruthenians were placed under the rule of the Czechs; a people so race-conscious as the Szeklers (Magyar), under the rule of the Rumanians. The Tyrol was cut in half and the German South Tyrol presented to Italy. Czecho-Slovakia and Poland were created as States which were nothing but a conglomeration of differing peoples who had nothing in common. Austria lay dismembered and broken on the battlefield of peace.

"Worst of all, in the centre of the Danube Basin lay Hungary, proud Hungary, robbed, dismembered. Bad consciences induced . . . the robbers . . . to

conclude the Little Entente. It had prided itself on being the strongest military power in Central Europe, with its 175 divisions. Where were they when Hitler broke into Prague? How strong are Rumania and Yugo-Slavia to-day, the last surviving members?"

He may well ask. Hitler walked round them and then into them, and not one finger was lifted while he prepared his eastern frontier to make ready for the westward drive.

Weimar to Potsdam

Out of all this welter of conflicting nationalisms, Klein shakes himself free to consider the journey of Germany down the road. He writes a splendid tribute to the statesman of the Weimar republic, especially Stresemann. But the road was there, and all Europe seemed to be determined to fly down it. Weimar was replaced by Potsdam and Potsdam, in the greatest of its many great absurdities, replaced itself with Hitler. And Hitler did the rest.

It is a strangely exciting chronicle, this book from Central Europe. It moves as history has moved, speedily, inevitably; on from one mistake to the next, from disaster to disaster; on to tragedy.

If we should ever have time in the excitement of current events to start thinking about what is to come, it is some simple statement like "Road to Disaster" that we should take as our first text book. It is a chronicle of futility, but it points the beginnings of the way to wisdom, whether Klein's prescription is taken as gospel or not.

—S.B.

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