



German History in Documents and Images

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Friedrich Nietzsche on Germany's Victory over France and the "Cultural Philistine": *Untimely Meditations* (1873-76)

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) had a tremendous impact on German philosophy in the nineteenth century and was one of its most original, provocative thinkers. After studying theology and philology, he was offered a professorship in Basel in 1869, at the mere age of 24. He briefly participated in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 as a military medic. In 1879, he was forced to give up his professorship in Basel because of health problems (he suffered from poor eyesight and frequent migraines). In 1889, he had a mental breakdown (brought on by syphilis) from which he never fully recovered. The excerpt below is from *Untimely Meditations* [*Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*], a series of essays that Nietzsche wrote shortly after German unification. This 1873 essay is entitled "David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer" ["David Strauss. Der Bekenner und Schriftsteller"]. Strauss (1808-1874) was a Protestant theologian and philosopher; in 1872, he had published the book *The Old Faith and the New* [*Der alte und der neue Glaube*]. Nietzsche mocked Strauss, grouping him with the many cultural Philistines [*Bildungsphilister*] who celebrated the recent war for what they perceived as its positive impact on German art and morals. What irked Nietzsche most of all was Strauss's smugness. In this essay, Nietzsche combines irony and outrage, arguing that Germany's military victory had nothing to do with culture and that a unified German culture simply did not exist, despite protestations to the contrary by writers of German prose, verse, and song. German culture, he declares below, was nothing more than a "chaotic jumble of all styles." Nietzsche also strives, from the very first line of this essay, to identify the "evil and perilous" consequences of the war, particularly as they were understood – or, rather, not understood – by philistine Germans.

"David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer"

I.

Public opinion in Germany seems almost to forbid discussion of the evil and perilous consequences of a war, and especially of one that has ended victoriously: there is thus all the more ready an ear for those writers who know no weightier authority than this public opinion and who therefore vie with one another in lauding a war and in seeking out the mighty influence it has exerted on morality, culture and art. This notwithstanding, it has to be said that a great victory is a great danger. Human nature finds it harder to endure a victory than a defeat; indeed, it seems to be easier to achieve a victory than to endure it in such a way that it does not in fact turn into a defeat. Of all the evil consequences, however, which have followed the recent war

with France* perhaps the worst is a widespread, indeed universal, error: the error, committed by public opinion and by all who express their opinions publicly, that German culture too was victorious in that struggle and must therefore now be loaded with garlands appropriate to such an extraordinary achievement. This delusion is in the highest degree destructive: not because it is a delusion – for there exist very salutary and productive errors – but because it is capable of turning our victory into a defeat: into the defeat, if not the extirpation, of the German spirit for the benefit of the ‘German Reich’.

Even supposing that a war of this kind were in fact a war between two cultures, the value of the victor would still be a very relative one and could certainly not justify choruses of victory or acts of self-glorification. For one would have to know what the defeated culture had been worth: perhaps it was worth very little: in which case the victory of the victorious culture, even if attended by the most magnificent success in arms, would constitute no invitation to ecstatic triumphs. On the other hand, in the present case there can be no question of a victory of German culture, for the simple reason that French culture continues to exist as heretofore, and we are dependent upon it as heretofore. Our culture played no part even in our success in arms. Stern discipline, natural bravery and endurance, superior generalship, unity and obedience in the ranks, in short, elements that have nothing to do with culture, procured for us the victory over opponents in whom the most important of these elements were lacking: the wonder is that that which at present calls itself ‘culture’ in Germany proved so small an obstacle to the military demands which had to be met for the achievement of a great success – perhaps it was only because that which calls itself culture foresaw a greater advantage in subordinating itself this time. But if it is now allowed to grow and luxuriate, if it is pampered with the flattering delusion that the victory belonged to *it*, then it will, as I have said, have the power to extirpate the German spirit – and who knows whether the German body remaining will be of any use whatever!

If it were possible to take that calm and tenacious bravery which the German demonstrated against the emotional and shortlived impetuosity of the French and turn it against the enemy within, against that highly ambiguous and in any case alien ‘cultivatedness’ which is nowadays dangerously misunderstood to constitute culture, then all hope for the creation of a genuine German culture, the antithesis of this cultivatedness, would not be lost: for the Germans have never lacked clear-sighted and courageous leaders and generals – though these have frequently lacked Germans. But whether it is in fact possible to redirect German bravery in this way seems to me more and more doubtful and, after the late war, daily more improbable; for I see how everyone is convinced that struggle and bravery are no longer required, but that, on the contrary, most things are regulated in the finest possible way and that in any case everything that needed doing has long since been done – in short, that the finest seeds of culture have everywhere been sown and are in places bursting into leaf and even into luxuriant

* The ‘recent war with France’ is the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. [All footnotes from Friedrich Nietzsche, “David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer,” in Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, edited by Daniel Breazeale, translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 3-6.]

blossom. In this realm it is not mere complacency, but joy and jubilation which reign. I sense this joy and jubilation in the incomparable self-assurance of our German journalists and manufacturers of novels, tragedies, songs and histories: for these types patently belong together in a single guild which seems to have entered into a conspiracy to take charge of the leisure and ruminative hours of modern man – that is to say, his ‘cultural moments’ – and in these to stun him with printed paper. Since the war, all is happiness, dignity and self-awareness in this guild: after such ‘successes of German culture’ it feels itself not merely confirmed and sanctioned, but almost sacrosanct; and it therefore speaks more solemnly, takes pleasure in addressing itself to the German people, publishes collected editions in the manner of the classics, and goes so far as to employ those international journals which stand at its service to proclaim certain individuals from its midst as the new German classics and model writers. One might perhaps have expected that the more thoughtful and learned among cultivated Germans would have recognized the dangers inherent in such a misuse of success, or at least have felt this spectacle as painful: for what could be more painful than the sight of a deformed man pluming himself before the mirror like a cockerel and exchanging admiring glances with his reflection? But the learned classes are happy to let happen what is happening, and have in any case quite enough to do in maintaining themselves without the additional burden of looking after the welfare of the German spirit. Its members are, moreover, supremely convinced that their own culture is the ripest and fairest fruit of the age, indeed of all the ages, and cannot comprehend why anyone should need to look after the welfare of German culture in general, since they themselves and countless numbers like them have already gone far, far beyond all such considerations. The more cautious observer, however, especially if he is a foreigner, cannot help noticing that what the German scholar now calls his culture and that jubilant culture of the new German classics differ from one another only in the extent of their knowledge: wherever the question is one not of knowledge and information, but of art and ability – wherever, that is to say, life bears witness to the culture – there is now only one German culture: and is it this that is supposed to have triumphed over France?

Such an assertion seems completely incomprehensible: all impartial judges, and finally the French themselves, have seen Germany’s decisive advantage to have lain in the more extensive knowledge possessed by its officers, in the superior training of its troops, and in the greater science of its conduct of the war. In what sense, then, can German culture be said to have triumphed, if one thinks to deduct from it German erudition? In no sense: for the moral qualities of stricter discipline and readier obedience have nothing to do with culture – though they distinguished the Macedonian soldiery from the Greek, for example, the latter were incomparably more cultured. It can only be the result of confusion if one speaks of the victory of German culture, a confusion originating in the fact that in Germany there no longer exists any clear conception of what culture is.

Culture is, above all, unity of artistic style in all the expressions of the life of a people. Much knowledge and learning is neither an essential means to culture nor a sign of it, and if needs be can get along very well with the opposite of culture, barbarism, which is lack of style or a chaotic jumble of all styles.

It is in such a chaotic jumble of styles that the German of our day dwells: and one seriously wonders how, with all his erudition, he can possibly fail to notice it, but, on the contrary, rejoices from the very heart at the 'culture' he at present possesses. For everything ought to instruct him: every glance he casts at his clothes, his room, his home, every walk he takes through the streets of his town, every visit he pays to a fashionable shop; in his social life he ought to be aware of the origin of his manners and deportment, in the world of our artistic institutions, of our concerts, theatres and museums, he ought to notice the grotesque juxtaposition and confusion of different styles. The German amasses around him the forms and colours, productions and curiosities of every age and every clime, and produces that modern fairground motley which his learned colleagues are then obliged to observe and classify as the 'modern as such', while he himself remains seated calmly in the midst of the tumult. But with this kind of 'culture', which is in fact only a phlegmatic lack of all feeling for culture, one cannot overcome enemies, least of all those who, like the French, actually possess a real and productive culture, regardless of what its value may be, and from whom we have hitherto copied everything, though usually with little skill.

If we had in fact ceased to copy it we would not thereby have triumphed over it, but only have liberated ourselves from it: only if we had imposed upon the French an original German culture could there be any question of a victory of German culture. In the meantime, we should not forget that we are still dependent on Paris in all matters of form, just as before – and that we have to go on being dependent, for up to now there has been no original German culture.

We all ought to have been aware of this from our own knowledge: in addition to which, one of the few who had a right to speak to the Germans of it in a tone of reproach has publicly revealed it. 'We Germans are of yesterday', Goethe once said to Eckermann; 'it is true that we have been soundly cultivating ourselves for a century, but another couple of centuries may have to pass before sufficient spirit and higher culture has penetrated our countrymen and become general for it to be possible to say of them: it is a long time since they were barbarians.'*

Source of English translation: Friedrich Nietzsche, "David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer," in Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, edited by Daniel Breazeale, translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 3-6.

Original German text printed in Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), "David Strauss. Der Bekenner und Schriftsteller," in Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* (1873-76). Original German text reprinted in *Nietzsches Schriften oder der furor philosophicus*, edited and introduced by Ralf Krause, CD-ROM. Berlin: heptagon, 2001, pp. 155-60.

* Goethe to Eckermann, on May 3, 1827.