



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Werner Sombart, *Merchants and Heroes [Händler und Helden]* (1915)

Many German intellectuals felt moved to interpret the First World War in grandiloquent terms of competing cultures or civilizations. For the economist Werner Sombart (1863-1941), the contest pitted *Helden* [heroes] against *Händler* [merchants]. The Germans, he explained, were a nation of heroes, committed to the great deed and animated by primordial drives; the English, by contrast, were practical, hedonistic, calculating, and base.

All great wars are religious wars. They were so in the past, they are in the present, and they will be so in the future. In an earlier era, wars were also religious wars in the minds of those who fought. Whether Kaiser Karl fought against the Saxons, whether the “Franks” rode out to liberate a sacred gravesite, whether the advancing Turks were beaten back, whether the German Kaisers protected their empire against the Italian cities, whether Protestants and Catholics fought for predominance in the age of Reformation – in all cases, those who waged war were aware that they were fighting for their faith, and we who, looking back, seek to understand the world-historical significance of these wars, understand that the feelings and thoughts of those who fought came from a profound source.

Even the Napoleonic Wars were interpreted by the best minds of the era as nothing other than religious wars. The most recent biographer of Freiherr vom Stein sees it this way, and his judgment of the Congress of Vienna is certainly correct, when he writes that Stein understood the whole business not as a struggle for power, but as a struggle between good and evil.

In the age of nation-states and capitalism, the deeper antagonisms, which have come to a head in the great world wars, thus do not lie on the surface. Instead, pure hunger for power or economic interests appear to be the sole reasons for the struggles. These may very well be the driving forces. But one would not get beneath the surface were one not to recognize behind these motives, which are visible to the simplest intelligence as the causes of war in our era – and particularly the holy war that Germany is now fighting against a world of enemies – the deeper antagonisms that are at war; and these are none other than religious antagonisms or, as we say nowadays, ideological antagonisms.

It is clear that in the present world wars a number of the most varied individual conflicts have come to a head. These are peripheral wars, such as those between Russia and Turkey over the control of the Dardanelles, between France and Germany over Alsace-Lorraine, between Austria-Hungary and Russia over hegemony in the Balkans. The main war is another one. Our enemies have seen this fact most clearly, as they proclaimed to the world the issue was between western European civilization, the “ideas of 1789,” and German “militarism”, German “barbarism.” In fact, they addressed instinctively but accurately the deepest antagonism. I would like to define it a little differently, when I say: at issue in this war are the *merchant* and the *hero*,

the mercantile and heroic *Weltanschauung*, and the culture that pertains to each. The reason why I am trying, by means of these terms, to isolate a profound and comprehensive antagonism between world-views and experiences of the world is the subject of the following analysis.

I wish to issue a warning here lest I give the impression of using the terms merchant and hero in an occupational sense. This is naturally not the case and cannot be the case if I use the terms to designate ideological antagonisms. For these are not necessarily bound to specific occupations. Here it is a question instead of the *sentiments and convictions* of the merchant or the hero, and it is certainly possible that someone whom fate has destined to sell pepper and raisins can be a hero (by virtue of his sentiments and convictions), while we daily experience the fact that a War Minister is a “merchant,” because he has the soul of a salesman, not a warrior.

First of all, individuals possess an ideology [or *Weltanschauung*], and thus the souls of merchants and the souls of heroes coexist in the same nation, the same city. I claim, however, that a war between nations is a war between *Weltanschauungen*, and thus I claim as well that merchants and heroes are at war here. In this light, we must be able to characterize entire peoples as one or the other. This happens as we strive to comprehend the soul of a nation, its spirit, its essence. This “soul of a nation,” this “spirit of a nation” – depending on whether we apprehend it metaphysically or purely empirically – is in any case a “something,” whose existence cannot be denied, which has an independent existence alongside and above all individual members of a nation – something that would endure if every person were to die and that, to a certain degree, asserts itself independently against living individuals. This national soul speaks from a thousand characteristics of a people (and must be recognized differently in each people): from philosophy and art, from the state and politics, from mores and customs.

In this sense one can distinguish between peoples that are merchant peoples and those that are heroic peoples, and in the same sense, mercantile and heroic ideologies stand in struggle for predominance in this great war. Their carriers, however, the two nations that are representatives of the ideological antagonisms, are the English and the Germans. Only as the English–German war does the war of 1914 take on its deeper world-historical significance. The issue of who shall rule the sea is not the great human question that is to be decided now; much more important and central to the fate of mankind is the question of which spirit proves the stronger: the mercantile or the heroic.

Therefore, we must be fully and lucidly aware of this antagonism, which encompasses the world in all its depths and expanses. To aid in this effort is the object of this book, in which I propose to describe in plain terms first the English, then the German spirit, in order then to weigh them against one another and to reveal to the soul of the German reader – I am not writing this for anyone else – the incomparable superiority of the German spirit, so that he might once again become glad of his Germanness.

Source: Werner Sombart, *Händler und Helden* [*Merchants and Heroes*]. Munich and Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1915, pp. 3-6.

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering