

# **TREITSCHKE AND THE GREAT WAR**

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Treitschke and the Great War by Joseph McCabe

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**JOSEPH MCCABE**

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THE GREAT WAR**



TREITSCHKE

## PREFACE

THE conduct of the German nation during the present war must be judged by the preliminary incidents and the brutality which marked the opening months of the war. In spite of a highly organised system of mendacity and misrepresentation, the truth has reached the ears of the civilised world, and some restraint has been imposed upon the German troops. We must, therefore, regard their conduct in the first months as the conduct they deliberately adopted. Their actions have been a sinister revelation to the nations of the world. There seems to have been an outpouring from the pit, and the problem for thoughtful people in every nation is how this

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morbid temper has got into the German nature.

Many people are misled by the word "culture," which has been associated with the German proceedings. What the Germans call *Kultur* is by no means the same thing as what English people call culture. It means civilisation. It means the whole system of social, political and commercial life; the schools, the parliamentary system, the industrial life, the technical skill, the military system, and everything which distinguishes the civilised man from the savage. The fact that various scholars of Germany seem to have approved the conduct of the war probably gives some colour to the general misunderstanding, yet how anyone could suppose that religious thinkers like Harnack and Eucken could approve the horrible outrages that have desecrated the soil of Belgium one cannot

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understand. The censorship in Germany is far more rigorous even than in England, and one may well suppose that these outrages are entirely unknown to the leading thinkers. Yet it is a fact that some of Germany's leading scholars have approved the violation of the neutrality of Belgium, and it is well known how German military policy prescribes the treatment of a conquered country if there be any resistance.

There is some taint in the blood or the brain of one of the greatest Powers of the modern world. It is, therefore, of interest to inquire whether there are any elements in German culture which indirectly might lead to or palliate such brutalities. Everybody now knows the sentiments of military writers like General von Bernhardi. With his name is associated, as the second apostle of the German modern gospel, the name



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of a distinguished historian, Heinrich von Treitschke.

To understand what is called "the soul of the German people," one of the most familiar phrases in German literature, the history of Germany must be borne in mind. The progress that has been made by the German people in the last one hundred years has few parallels in history. Prussia emerged from the Napoleonic war a small and deeply shattered State. Within the hundred years since the final victory at Waterloo, it has gathered province after province, and to-day it commands one of the most powerful and—we thought yesterday—most enlightened nations of the modern world. Germany is naturally proud of its great success. Nor must we suppose that this success has been purely military. How many times in recent years have not our magazines assured us

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of the superiority of German education, German commercial enterprise, German technical skill? The serious problem is not to explain the pride of the German people, but to understand how these achievements are squared with the horrible outrages which apparently find little restraint in higher quarters in Germany.

Treitschke was one of the most popular historians of modern Germany. Of a very poetic and romantic nature, he impressed the story of his country upon crowds of youths in the greatest German University with a fire and eloquence of which we find few examples amongst modern historians. Although a Czech by extraction, his nature responded ardently to the features of modern German history, and he became the most influential teacher in the country. Prussia was to him almost a sacred Power. The Reformation had

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inaugurated a new period in the life of Europe, and Prussia was its great interpreter. Beginning life as a Liberal, his sympathy with Bismarck and the Prussian Government converted him into a Conservative of the most obstinate character. He almost deified the ways and traditions of the Hohenzollerns.

In person also, Treitschke was eminently fitted to be the apostle of Bismarckism. As a young man, although a brilliant student, he was sent down from his university for duelling and constant disturbance. Accident prevented him from becoming a soldier, and he carried all the ardour of a soldier into the interpretation of history. Like Goethe he wavered long between poetry and action, and he ended by infusing poetic fire into a gospel of drastic action. No demand could be made by the State, however exacting, but Treitschke