

**LINGUISTIC  
OPPRESSION IN THE  
GERMAN EMPIRE**

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Linguistic Oppression in the German Empire by Ernest Barker

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**ERNEST BARKER**

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Linguistic Oppression<sup>21</sup>  
in  
The German Empire<sup>709</sup>

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EMPIRE.** By Ernest Barker

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## LINGUISTIC OPPRESSION IN THE GERMAN EMPIRE

FOR the last hundred years a dominant conception among the Germans has been that of "the folk" (*das Volk*). The folk—they have thought and said—is a being and almost a person; and as such it has its corresponding attributes—its sense of right; its way of speech; its songs, its poetry and its music. Law, according to a great German jurist, is the organ of folk-right; folk-music, folk-songs, folk-poetry—all these are the natural outpourings of the *Volksgeist*; while as for the folk-speech, that is not only the medium for the expression, but also the condition of the existence, of these other things.

The philosophy of Hegel represents in many ways the apotheosis of this German idea of the folk. To Hegel the folk, politically organised as a state, is the home of a system of social ethics that inspires and controls the life of the individual, who finds his

peace in its will and his duty in filling duly a station in its system. "The spirit of a nation controls and entirely dominates from within each person," so that "he feels it to be his own very being. . . . he looks upon it as his absolute final aim," and "his life is hid with that of his fellows in the common life of his people." The "culture" of the folk—the nation or people—thus becomes a sacred tradition; and the language in which it is enshrined becomes, as it were, the vehicle which carries the holy ark of the covenant.

Imbued with ideas of this order, the Germans have shown themselves sedulously careful to maintain the purity of their language, seeking to exclude all foreign or "Welsh" words, and to express every idea and every concept by means of native Germanic words. "This movement," it is said, "has grown with the growth of national unity, and a powerful society, the *Sprachverein*, has been recently founded, and has published handbooks of native words for almost every department of modern life." Thus the language of commerce, of chemistry and of every range of thought, is made purely German; and thus the German language, unlike the English, which has borrowed freely, and continues to borrow freely, from almost every language that has been or

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*R. D.*



now is spoken, remains what we may call "self-sufficient," and indebted to no other.

Much may be said, both for and against this cult of linguistic purity. A language which refuses to borrow from other languages loses that flexibility, subtlety of expression and variety of shades of meaning, which an abundance of "loan-words" enables a language that borrows such words freely to attain; but, on the other hand, linguistic purity conduces to a political result, as indeed it is largely based on a political motive—a conscious and vivid sense of national unity and national uniqueness.\*

But whatever may be said of the two ideals—"nationalism in language, as against borrowing; a pure, as opposed to a mixed, language"—a new and difficult problem arises, when we find the people who use the pure German tongue seeking to suppress other tongues that are used within the boundaries of German territory—the Polish, the Danish and the French. This is a policy which the Germans have more and more pursued since they finally attained their own national unity in 1870; and it is a policy which cannot but seem to most of us illogical and

\* See Mr. Pearsall Smith's volume in the Home University Library on *The English Language*, Chapter II., and especially pp. 55-62.

inconsistent. If folk-speech is a consecrated thing, because it is the vehicle of folk-culture, surely the folk-speech of Poles and Danes and Frenchmen can plead a title to existence, and a right to be used no less than that of the Germans. To inflict dumbness on a people and to mutilate its tongue, at the same time that you proclaim the pure sanctity of your own speech, is to sin against the spirit of nationality with the same breath with which you proclaim it holy.

Why, then, do the Germans seek to coerce into the use of an alien speech—a speech which is the vehicle of a culture that is not their own culture—those peoples who dwell in German territory, but do not belong by blood or tradition to the German people itself? At bottom, perhaps, the reason is an instinctive feeling that the area of German government should be also the area of German nationality, and that, if there are alien elements in the area of German government, they must be, as it were, chemically changed and transmuted until they are unified with and incorporated into the area of German nationality. Just as foreign words must be purged from the German language, so foreign languages must be purged from the German soil; and just as it is resolved that foreign words must not be used in

German speech, so it is enacted that foreign speech must not be used on German soil.

The analogy here implied and used is not, of course, a true or valid analogy. It is one thing for a German who speaks German to say that he himself will use no word but German, nor does he lose his freedom if he thus abnegates the use of foreign words: it is another thing for a German to say that other peoples within the German borders, who do not speak German, shall use no language but German in schools and courts of law and public meetings, and these other peoples *do* lose their freedom when they are thus compulsorily deprived of the use of their native language. But the analogy, however, untrue, is pressed, as we shall see, to its uttermost consequences.

The instinctive feeling which leads to its application is corroborated by other instincts. There is the German passion for drill and uniformity and *Pöhserei*. Accustomed to putting men into actual and physical uniform, the German Government has drifted, as it were, by a curious extension of policy, into the habit of seeking to put men into metaphorical and mental uniform. After all, it can be argued, the army needs a uniform language of command; and if the army demands linguistic unity, will not linguistic unity