

Deepening Pain

The Quakers wasted no time. Within days of arriving they hosted a picnic at a hospital where delicacies such as 'Red Cross Glaxo, Miss Playne's chicken jelly and a bunch of Dorothy Perkins [grapes]' were dispensed. 'It was delightful to ply them with thick slices of bread and margarine and lots of treacle,' remarked one of Fry's colleagues.¹ A much larger party of American Quakers also arrived in Berlin to spearhead the 'Child Feeding', an aid programme supported by Herbert Hoover that at its peak provided nourishment for some 1.75 million children.

Joan Fry and her little band did not linger in Berlin. On 28 July 1919, just one month after the Treaty of Versailles was signed, she wrote home describing a journey to Essen and Düsseldorf, where they had been to investigate the shortage of coal. They were not encouraged. 'The coal question meets us at every turn with a terrible insistence,' Fry reported back to London. Lack of fuel meant that the hopelessly overcrowded trains on which they travelled often stopped for hours on end. 'What can you expect?' a stationmaster said to her. 'When the French and the English take away the coal we can't run trains.'² Delays were not the only reason journeys were fraught. There

was almost nothing to eat, carriage seats had long since been stripped of their plush covering to be recycled into clothing, while the windows, shorn of their leather straps, were jammed or broken. The Quakers were indefatigable travellers and this expedition was just the first of countless such journeys Fry and her companions were to undertake over the next seven years from their base in Berlin – organising relief work, attending conferences and spreading their message of peace and reconciliation to anyone who would listen.

For the few civilian foreigners who, like Joan Fry and Harry Franck, were travelling east of the Rhine during the summer of 1919, the shock and despair felt by ordinary people in the wake of the Treaty of Versailles (signed on 28 June) was impossible to ignore. Firm in the belief that they had been honourably defeated and confident that President Wilson would guarantee them fair treatment, most Germans were quite unprepared for the humiliation it imposed on their country. Germany was to lose all its colonies (the most significant lay in Africa), its most productive industrial areas were to be under foreign control for at least fifteen years, and it would have to pay an unimaginable sum in compensation. Its army was to be reduced to 100,000 men and its navy also decimated. In order to give Poland access to the Baltic, the port of Danzig was to come under Polish control (although its population was predominantly German) and the 'Polish corridor' was to be created, thus dividing the bulk of Germany from the province of East Prussia. Furthermore, Germany had to sign the 'guilt clause' accepting responsibility for starting the war. But many people found the most degrading demand of all (in the event it was never met) the provision that the Kaiser and 1,000 prominent figures should be handed over to the Allies and tried for war crimes.

The conversations Franck and Fry held with their fellow rail passengers that summer were especially revealing. One old lady explained to Joan that, although she had felt no hatred during the war, the peace treaty aroused intense resentment: 'To be treated as outcasts, as individuals with whom no relations are possible, is even worse than hunger or constant anxiety.' Another woman stated how much in normal times she would have enjoyed speaking English, 'but now a broken people does not want to hear it'.³ The women, Franck noted, were the most vitriolic against the Treaty in general while the old men minded most about the loss of colonies: 'We would rather pay any amount of indemnity than lose territory ... The Allies are trying to Balkanise us ... they want to *vernichten* us, to destroy us completely ... we believed in Wilson and he betrayed us.' More ominously, others expressed their dread of the future: 'Now we must drill hatred into our children from their earliest age, so that in thirty years, when the time is ripe....'⁴

Having lived among the Germans in the months after the Armistice and come to admire their virtues, Stewart Roddie and Truman Smith sympathised with these sentiments. Smith blamed the French for the harshness of the Treaty: '... certainly mercy and the future of the world cannot be expected from France. So we too must drink the bitter cup of despair. I had hoped a better era might be on the horizon and that our labour, sacrifices and separations from those dear to us might bear fruit in a "large" peace.'⁵ Stewart Roddie, writing later, believed that the Allies' greatest mistake was letting fourteen months elapse between the Armistice and ratification of the Treaty in January 1920:

The right moment for the passing of the Allied verdict upon Germany had long passed. Germany had had time

to sit in judgment upon herself and her former leaders, and had decided that the worst she and they could possibly have been charged with was manslaughter – but that was not admitted – and here she was accused, found guilty of, and punished for murder and robbery with violence.⁶

But, in the midst of all the gloom, there was the occasional glimpse of a brighter world. Joan Fry recalled the sight of nine teams of horses ploughing a single field as she journeyed across the great cornfields of Mecklenburg, and of the setting sun reflected in the vast stretches of water that lie north of the Elbe estuary. Nor would she ever forget – at a time when the ‘tiny shrunken limbs and old, ashen grey faces of starving babies’⁷ were an all too familiar reminder of human misery – the evening she sat under the stars, listening to her friend Albrecht Mendelssohn* playing his grandfather’s music on the piano. Violet Markham remembered the Rhineland as a ‘garden of enchantment’, delighting in the vivid green of the fields, the yellow splashes of mustard, the varied tints of tree, and bush, and blossom ‘all melting and glowing together in the clear sunlight’.⁸

* Grandson of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1874–1936) was a professor of international law and an active pacifist. In 1912 he was appointed to a committee seeking better relations between England and Germany. In 1920 he was made Professor of Foreign Law at Hamburg University and in 1923 he set up the Institute for Foreign Policy – one of the first research institutes for peace studies ever founded. After Hitler came to power in 1933 Mendelssohn was forced to resign all his academic positions. In 1934 he went to England, where he was elected a senior research fellow of Balliol College. He died in Oxford in November 1936.

Franck, too, had halcyon memories. Having decided to spend six weeks walking from Munich to Weimar, he spent the first night at an inn in the small village of Hohenkammer: 'I cannot quite picture to myself', he wrote, 'what would happen to the man who thus walked in upon a gathering of American farmers, boldly announcing himself a German just out of the army, but something tells me he would not have passed so perfectly agreeable an evening as I did in the village inn of Hohenkammer.'⁹ The following day, in perfect weather, he set out across

gently rolling fields deep-green with spring alternating with almost black patches of evergreen forests, through which the broad, light-gray highroad wound and undulated as soothingly as an immense ocean-liner on a slowly pulsating sea. Every few miles a small town rose above the horizon, now astride the highway, now gazing down upon it from a sloping hillside. Wonderfully clean towns they were, speckless from their scrubbed floors to their whitewashed church steeples, all framed in velvety green meadows or the fertile fields in which their inhabitants of both sexes plodded diligently but never hurriedly through the labours of the day. It was difficult to imagine how these simple, gentle-spoken folk could have won a world-wide reputation as the most savage and brutal warriors in modern history.¹⁰



On 28 February 1923, Violet Bonham Carter, accompanied by her maid, boarded a train at Liverpool Street Station in London. Daughter of Herbert Asquith (British prime minister, 1908–1916) and shortly to be elected chairman of the National Liberal Federation, she was bound for Berlin.

Her purpose was to investigate the French occupation of the Ruhr – an act she regarded as one of ‘dangerous insanity’. On 11 January 60,000 French and Belgian troops had marched into Germany’s industrial heartland intent on extracting the coal that their countries had been promised by the Treaty of Versailles but which Germany was failing to deliver. In Bonham Carter’s view, the reparations policy insisted on by France (by 1923 Germany’s debt to the Allies stood at £6.6 billion, the equivalent of £280 billion in 2013) was morally unjust and politically mad. Many in Britain and America agreed, believing that Germany’s economic collapse would only result in victory for the communists.

The journey to Berlin was unpleasant. The train was grubby and crowded. And because the coal was of such poor quality, it was also frustratingly slow. At the border, Violet experienced her first encounter with German inflation – soon to be hyperinflation. She received 200,000 marks for £2, ‘great bundles of paper-chase money which I could hardly carry’ and was not amused by ‘3 intolerable and grotesque Music Hall Americans’ who thought the exchange rate a huge joke (‘5,000 marks, that’s a nickel’). However, she enjoyed her chat with an Aberdeen fish merchant on his way to Germany to buy a German boat and to hire a German crew because, he explained, they were so superior to anything he could find at home. ‘I’m pro German now,’ he told her, ‘we all are.’¹¹

At 10.30 p.m. on 1 March, after fifteen hours’ travelling, they arrived in Berlin and drove straight to the British Embassy, where Violet had been invited to stay with the ambassador, Lord D’Abernon, and his wife, Helen. ‘It was divine to arrive dirty and exhausted at the cleanliness and comfort of the Embassy,’ Violet wrote in her diary. ‘Dear Tyler opened the

door and I was told Helen had gone to bed after the ball last night but that Edgar was up and alone. It was the greatest fun finding him in a big delightful room. The ballroom is yellow brocade with a lovely bit of tapestry hung over some hideous German embossments.’¹² The Embassy, on the Wilhelmstrasse, was imposing if uninspiring. The front faced directly on to the street while towering over it at the back was the gloomy Adlon Hotel.

Lord D’Abernon, Britain’s first post-war ambassador to Germany, had been *en poste* since October 1920. Over six foot tall and Olympian in manner, he looked every inch an ambassador. His job may have been difficult but it was a good deal easier than that of the French ambassador, Pierre de Margerie, who, along with his fellow countrymen, faced social ostracism after the occupation of the Ruhr. The restaurant at the Adlon was the only one in Berlin still prepared to serve the French and Belgians. In almost every other shop window appeared the notice: *Franzosen und Belgier nicht erwünscht* [French and Belgians not wanted]. According to Bonham Carter, the situation was particularly painful for de Margerie, who had arrived in Berlin only weeks before ‘longing to be loved’.¹³

Lady D’Abernon, one of the great beauties of her generation, was also courageous, having worked as an anaesthetist nurse in France during the war. She was under no illusion as to the task in Berlin. ‘To try and re-establish relatively pleasant normal relations will require a mountain of effort and of persevering goodwill,’ she wrote in her diary on 29 July 1920. As she disliked Germany, and all things German, her role was to remain one of duty rather than pleasure. Whatever other attractions the city may have offered its visitors, charm was not high on the list. There were, in Lady D’Abernon’s words, ‘no narrow streets, no changes of level, no crooked passages,

no unexpected courts and corners'.¹⁴ She did, however, take pleasure in the sight of horse-drawn sleighs gliding across the snow in the Tiergarten:

The horse is always covered with little tinkling bells and the harness is crowned by an immense panache of white horsehair, like the plume of a Life Guardsman's helmet, only much larger. Frequently the sleighs are painted scarlet or bright blue and the occupants, who are often smothered in furs, contrive to look picturesque and rather French *dix-huitième siècle* [eighteenth century].¹⁵

Despite her personal reservations, Helen D'Abernon was to prove an astute observer. 'In Berlin it is the fashion to make a parade of poverty and retrenchment,' she wrote after meeting the foreign minister and his wife for the first time, 'so in order to be in harmony with the prevailing atmosphere, I attired myself in a demure dove-coloured frock of Puritan simplicity.'¹⁶ Nonetheless, she abandoned all austerity for their first diplomatic reception, determined that the British Embassy should appear as splendid and dignified as it had before the war. The ballroom overflowed with flowers. The servants went about their duties resplendent in buff and scarlet liveries. Two pre-war retainers, Fritz and Elf, in cocked hats and long gold-laced coats, stood at the entrance, holding elaborate staves (surmounted with the royal coat of arms) in outstretched arms. These they thumped three times on the arrival of an important guest. Afterwards, Lady D'Abernon claimed that she 'had not exchanged ten words of interest with anyone except a Bolshevik from the Ukraine' whose political creed, she observed, 'had in no way hindered his enjoyment of an *ancien régime* party'.¹⁷

She was not a sentimental woman and for the most part remained unmoved by German pleadings of hardship. Joan Fry failed to impress her. 'Miss Fry is all self-sacrifice and burning enthusiasm,' she noted, 'but her compassion seems to be reserved almost exclusively for Germans. She shys [sic] away from any allusion to suffering and privations in Great Britain.'¹⁸ Nor did Lady D'Abernon leave Violet Bonham Carter in any doubt as to the true state of affairs in Germany: 'Believe me,' she told her, 'the Germans are *not* suffering as they say. There is no great poverty here. 95% are living in plenty, 5% are starving.' After visiting Berlin's poorest district herself, Violet tended to agree, having seen 'nothing one could *compare* to our slums. All the streets are wide, the houses big and built with windows the same size as the Embassy ones.'¹⁹

For Violet, as for so many other observers of inflation-ridden Germany, it was the plight of the middle classes that aroused her greatest sympathy. As no one could any longer afford their professional services, and as inflation had destroyed their capital, many were reduced to total penury. Within their neat, clean and respectable homes, Violet was informed, 'terrible quiet tragedies' were taking place each day. Having sold their last possessions, many of them, including doctors, lawyers and teachers, preferred to swallow poison rather than suffer the shame of starvation.²⁰ When hyperinflation reached its peak in November 1923, even the sceptical Lady D'Abernon was moved at the 'distressing spectacle of gentlefolk half hidden behind the trees in the Tiergarten timidly stretching out their hands for help'.²¹ Violet Bonham Carter found this dismal state of affairs hard to reconcile with the jewels, furs and flowers she saw in the expensive shops on Berlin's smartest streets. But, as Lady D'Abernon explained, it was only the *Schiebern* [profiteers] – living like 'fighting cocks' in all the best

hotels – who could afford such luxuries. She also pointed out how 'their women wear fur coats with pearls and other jewels on the top of them, the effect of which is further emphasized by the surprising addition of high yellow boots'.²²

The communist and British trades unionist Tom Mann was quick to spot the profiteers when he visited Berlin for a party conference in the spring of 1924. He noted 'their typical bourgeois appearance and behaviour in eating heavy meals, smoking fat long cigars and generally behaving as though they had tons of cash'. But even more distressing for Mann was the worrying rift between the 'young militants' and the 'old reactionary trades union officials'. He reported that the Communist Party was expecting to increase its members in the Reichstag from fifteen to fifty at the next election. He did not, he told his wife, think much of the general political confusion in Berlin – 'Such a mix there is, no less than 15 political parties or sections running candidates.' Much more satisfactory was the evening spent at a performance of *Die Meistersinger*. 'Betimes I thought the old cobbler had too much to say for himself,' commented Mann, 'but it was wonderfully well done ... they had about 250 on a very large stage, not crowded, with the banners and regalia – and the chorus was grand.'²³

He was certainly not the only foreigner to notice just how much music meant to ordinary Germans. 'Music is their finest and most potent medium of expression in moments like this,' wrote Violet Bonham Carter, 'one can't imagine any political demonstration in England opening with a very long string quartet.'²⁴ After attending one such event herself, she returned to the Embassy to find Lady D'Abernon 'nobly entertaining thirty English wives of Germans – such pathetic creatures'. One woman lived in a single room with her husband who had not spoken to her for a year. However, breezily sweeping aside

her fellow countrywomen's miserable predicament, Violet reported that 'they were all much cheered when Colonel Roddie played the piano and sang, and they all had tea'.²⁵ At dinner that evening she was placed next to Germany's second president, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg. She was not impressed. 'I sat between Hindenburg – rather a little man who I disliked – and an insignificant Italian.'²⁶

In 1920 Stewart Roddie was appointed to the Military Inter-Allied Commission of Control (headquartered in the Adlon) whose task it was to disarm Germany. But, judging from his memoir, *Peace Patrol*, he spent as much time comforting distressed members of the former imperial family as in tracking down illicit weapons. With his Rupert Brooke looks and sympathetic manner, the former music teacher from Inverness moved discreetly among them, listening to their woes, offering advice and occasionally intervening with his superiors on their behalf. *Peace Patrol* reads like an international *Who's Who*. As well as the Hohenzollerns, its pages are crowded with the names of military and political celebrities, European royalty and the British aristocracy – all of whom, it seems, were on intimate terms with the ubiquitous colonel.

In the summer of 1919 Stewart Roddie had visited Princess Margaret of Prussia, youngest sister of the former Kaiser and granddaughter of Queen Victoria. Although she and her husband, Prince Frederick Charles of Hesse, still lived near Frankfurt in the vast Schloss Friedrichshof at Kronberg (inherited from her mother, Empress Frederick), they did so in grief and poverty. Not only had they lost two sons in the war, but their lands had also been confiscated. They received nothing from the state, and their own resources had been wiped

out by inflation. Stewart Roddie describes how he stood in the hall as the Princess slowly descended the broad stairway to greet him. 'In her long, severe black dress with little collar and cuffs of white lawn she made a picture of infinite sadness,' he wrote.²⁷ Several years later, Joan Fry and a party of Quakers also visited Friedrichshof:

We took our courage in both hands and went to the Schloss. We were only kept waiting a short time before we were ushered into a fine drawing room which looked on to a beautiful lawn. After a minute or two the Grand Duke and Duchess, or, as we ought to say, the ex-royalties, came in from an adjoining room and talked to us in a quite simple and friendly way. We all stood for it seemed that they did not wish us to stay long. Marion said that she saw the lunch table ready in the room from which they came ...²⁸

Princess Margaret's correspondence makes plain just how short of cash they were: 'Many, many thanks for the letters, also for the hairnets,' she wrote to Lady Corkran* in 1924. '£2 does indeed seem too little for the tables so perhaps we had better wait for a better opportunity. Would you send me a cheque for the white one? I am so grateful to you for getting as much as you did for it although more would have been welcome.'²⁹ Despite Princess Margaret's troubles, her letters reveal that she had not entirely lost interest in the contemporary world. An advertisement pinned to one reads: 'Wave your hair yourself in ten minutes. No heat, no electric current required. Just slip

* Lady (Hilda) Corkran was lady-in-waiting to Princess Beatrice, Queen Victoria's youngest daughter.

the hair into a West Electric Hair Curler.' On this, the Kaiser's sister has scribbled, 'Do you think all this is true? Would you advise trying the curlers? No doubt it is all exaggerated.'³⁰

When Stewart Roddie visited Friedrichshof, he had been outraged 'to find the place over-run by black troops'. Indeed, France's deployment of colonial soldiers provoked a chorus of criticism – and not just from Germans. In those unashamedly racist times, many British observers saw it as a conscious attempt by France to heap yet further humiliation on Germany. Joan Fry noted the rising resentment among the Germans who had to provide extra homes for 'the many unwanted brown babies, who cannot be put in such homes as are provided for white children'.³¹ An American Quaker, Dorothy Detzer, was shockingly outspoken:

I arrived at Mainz about four in the afternoon, on September 3rd. When we climbed off the train to the platform I suddenly went sick at the sight which greeted our eyes all along the platform. One had heard so much of the French occupation, and I was expecting to see troops like our southern darkies. Instead we found savages. I lived for over a year in the Philippine Islands and my first reaction was that here was Moco-land again – only that the natives were in uniforms instead of g-strings as would be their native 'costume.' And I think that pity for them was stronger than anything else. I can't quite see why we should expect more from this race than we should from uniformed monkeys. They do not – from their faces – seem much more developed.

She was equally horrified by a huge torchlight parade in Wiesbaden composed of African soldiers carrying posters

depicting caricatures of 'Hun heads'. A French bystander informed her that such parades were held frequently, their purpose being to remind the Germans who had won the war. 'I shall never forget', wrote Detzer, 'the looks on the faces of those silent Germans who stood watching that parade.'³²

Crossing a road in Düsseldorf, one particularly cold winter's day in 1923, Jacques Benoist-Méchin, a young officer serving with the French occupying force, was also struck by the incongruity of meeting a platoon of *Tirailleurs marocains* [Moroccan sharpshooters], 'their faces bronzed by African sun'. Like Dorothy Detzer, he confessed to feeling sick at the sight of them. 'What were they doing here in this filth and fog?' he asked.³³ His account of life in the occupied Ruhr suggests that, if it was miserable for Germans, it was not much better for the French. When he first reported for duty, his senior officer explained that they were more or less in a state of war. The wires had been cut and they were completely isolated. He would be ill advised to walk anywhere alone. The German workforce, backed by the government, had chosen to defy the French in the only way open to them – passive resistance. Not that their protests were always that passive. On 1 February Benoist-Méchin recorded 1,083 acts of sabotage. He captures the bleakness of conditions in the occupied zone with his description of the Krupp factory at Essen to which he escorted twenty French engineers: 'It is snowing again. Cranes, pylons and gigantic chimneys dominate the landscape. Four enormous furnaces, their massive profiles carved against an apocalyptic sky, are dead. Their carcasses have been abandoned.'³⁴

It was difficult for travellers (at least the Anglophones), whatever their personal interpretation of events, not to be touched

by the plight of the people they encountered in the immediate post-war years. Germans from all walks of life told them repeatedly how betrayed they felt – by the Kaiser, their politicians and generals and especially by President Wilson and the Treaty of Versailles. Through no fault of their own, they had lost their colonies, their coal, their health and prosperity and – most distressing of all – their self-respect. The currency was worthless while the absurdly high reparations could never be met since the Allies were intent on depriving them of their raw materials. Nor could they understand why England constantly gave way to a revengeful France whose brutal black soldiers, so they contended, freely raped and murdered.³⁵ And how were they to explain all this to the next generation, to their undernourished, rickety children who, thanks to the so-called peace treaty, now faced a future under the heel of Bolsheviks and Jews? Although foreign travellers were aware that in parts of the countryside life was slowly returning to normal, and that the native thrift, industry and self-discipline remained unimpaired, most returned home with an overriding sense of the country's suffering. Too many Germans, in their experience, were hungry, cold and without hope.

It was against this background that, on 15 November 1922, Captain Truman Smith arrived in Munich – a city still festering with civil unrest and political intrigue. Smith, now assistant military attaché at the American Embassy in Berlin, had gone there to report on the National Socialists. This political party was not thought to be of much importance but the American ambassador wanted more information. Smith was therefore asked to make enquiries among Hitler's entourage and if possible to meet Hitler himself to assess his abilities and potential. Three days later, Smith pencilled into his notebook: 'Great excitement. I am invited to go with Alfred Rosenberg to see

the Hundertschaften [companies of 100 men] pass in review before Hitler on the Cornelius Street.' Afterwards he wrote:

A remarkable sight indeed. Twelve hundred of the toughest roughnecks I have ever seen in my life passed in review before Hitler at the goosestep under the old Reichflag, wearing red armbands with Hakenkreuze ... Hitler shouted 'Death to the Jews' etc. and etc. There was frantic cheering. I never saw such a sight in my life.³⁶

Several days later Smith was introduced to Hitler, who agreed to meet him the following Monday. The interview took place on 20 November at 4 p.m. in the third-floor room of Georgenstrasse 42. The American remembered the room as being like 'a back bedroom in a decaying New York tenement, drab and dreary beyond belief'.³⁷ Looking back in later years, Smith wished that, rather than just record Hitler's political views, he had concentrated more on his personality and idiosyncrasies.

Some months later, Jacques Benoist-Méchin's commanding officer came into his office to ask if he knew anything about a political party recently founded in Munich by a certain Aloysius Hitler? The request had come directly from the French war ministry, whose notice had been drawn to the fact that this Hitler was giving speeches to roomfuls of fanatics in which he denounced everything and everyone – including France. Benoist-Méchin had never heard of Hitler or his party but suggested that they consult the British.

Two days later back came the response. According to the British source, there was nothing to be alarmed about. The National Socialist Party was just a fire in the straw that would vanish as quickly as it had materialised. The men involved were Bavarian separatists of no significance and with no possibility

of influencing events outside Bavaria. In fact, Hitler might even be worth encouraging since he wanted to claim independence for Bavaria, which might lead to the reinstatement of the Wittelsbach monarchy and possibly even the break-up of the German Reich. 'And by the way,' the message continued, 'Hitler's first name is Adolf – not Aloysius.'³⁸ On 10 November 1923, almost exactly a year after Smith's interview with Hitler, Lady D'Abernon recorded in her diary that her husband had been woken in the middle of the night by a senior German diplomat, anxious for advice on how to deal with an uprising in Munich. The chief agitator, she noted, was 'a man of low origin' called Adolf Hitler.³⁹