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AN INDEPENDENT MIND

Europe and the Arts

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Declaration of the Independence of the Mind

Romain Rolland

1919

Workers of the Mind, comrades scattered throughout the world, separated for five years by armies, censorship and the hatred of nations at war, we address an Appeal to you at this hour when barriers are falling and frontiers are re-opening, to revive our fraternal union, but as a new, more secure and reliable union than that which previously existed.

The War threw our ranks into confusion. The majority of intellectuals put their science, their art, their reason at the service of governments. We wish to accuse no one, to direct no reproach. We know the weakness of individual souls and the elemental force of great collective currents: the latter has swept aside the former in an instant, for nothing had been prepared to help in the work of resistance. Let this experience at least help us for the future!

And let us first of all acknowledge the disasters that have been brought about by the almost total abdication of the

intelligence of the world and its voluntary enslavement to unchained forces. Thinkers and artists have added an incalculable sum of poisonous hatred to the plague that devours Europe's flesh and spirit; they sought in the arsenal of their knowledge, their memory, their imagination, old and new reasons, historical reasons, scientific, logical and poetic reasons to hate; they worked to destroy comprehension and love between men. And thus they have disfigured, debased, lowered, degraded Thought, of which they were the representatives. They made Thought the instrument of passions and (without knowing it, perhaps) of the selfish interests of a political or social clan, a state, a country or a class. At present, out of this savage battle from which all the involved countries, victorious or vanquished, emerge battered, ruined and in the bottom of their heart (though they do not admit it) ashamed and humiliated by their excess of madness, Thought, compromised with them in their struggle, emerges with them, fallen.

Stand up! Let us disentangle the Mind from its compromises, its humiliating alliances, its hidden bondage. The Mind is the slave of no one. It is we who are the servants of the Mind. We have no other master. We exist to uphold, to defend its light, to rally around it all misguided men. Our duty is to maintain a fixed point, to point to the polar star, in the midst of the swirling passions in the night. Among these passions of pride and mutual destruction, we make no choice. We reject them all. We honor Truth alone, free, frontierless, limitless, without prejudices of nations or castes. Assuredly, we are not uninterested in Humanity. It is for Humanity that we work, but for it as a whole. We

do not know peoples. We know the People – unique, universal – the People that suffers, that struggles, that fails and that constantly rises to its feet again, and that always marches along a rough road drenched in its blood – the People of all men, all equally our brothers. And it is in order that they may, like us, become conscious of this fraternity, that we raise above their blind conflicts, the Arch of Alliance – the free Mind, one and manifold, eternal.

This text was translated from French to English by David James Fisher, from *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement* (Berkeley 1988).

CONTEMPORARY ESSAYS

Power Station

Arnon Grunberg

“The European dream is a logical extension of my reservoir of ideas, that is in need of permanent supply. It is a domain in need of stocking up, that does not generate itself.”

Neo Rauch

Heroism

Spring, 1940. The German army is on the verge of pulverising the French armed forces. Jan, a spy who works for the Allies, receives orders – which seem strange to him as well – to make sure that another spy, a man by the name of Albert, stays with his wife and child. That is the premise of the novella *The Mission* by the Czech writer Egon Hostovský.

In his thoughts, Jan says to those “who were frightened and had almost lost confidence, and also to those who are

in a hurry to fight and to die”: “First something must be torn down, something must above all be crushed if you wish to climb out of the coffin of unfreedom!”

After 1945, the haste to fight and to die, for one’s country or any other ideal, has waned considerably in Western Europe – and not only there. In fact, the extent to which the German people’s enthusiasm for war on the eve of the First World War was actually a myth, the result of propaganda, is still open to discussion.

Whatever the case, the hurrying became dallying. Roughly speaking, that is the difference between the first half of the 20th century and the second half, which started in 1945. To that we must add that the haste to die may have waned, but the number of frightened civilians who have “almost lost their confidence” seems only to have grown. It is the words “fear” and “distrust”, after all, often accompanied by “uncertainty”, that always pop up in explanations for the rise of populism, which can probably better be termed right-wing extremism.

That dallying could only go hand in hand with the unmasking of heroism. The all-too-understandable reluctance to serve as cannon fodder was in need of arguments and proof; the mere desire not to die prematurely was, as arguments go, a bit feeble.

In Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Captain John Yossarian realises that war is an absurd machine that kills many and lets a few live, comparable more to an epidemic than to any noble enterprise. And in *The Darkroom of Damocles*, W.F. Hermans portrays the hero of the resistance as a victim and usurer of his own identity crisis.

The unmasking of heroism also had something smug about it.¹ There were, undeniably, those who had risked or given up their lives to save others. Even if one refuses to embellish those deeds with big, heroic words, that does little to change the deeds themselves. Heroism may have fallen from favor, but self-sacrifice remains a reality.²

The unmasking of the hero freed the common man from the obligation to see life as much more than the enjoyment of comfort. Life was not and should not be a battle; it was supposed to be a pleasant affair, a question of luxury, in fact. That was the consequence of the unmasking of heroism and that, ultimately, was the essence of the post-war consensus. There is much that can be said about the *Wirtschaftswunder*, but not that it is an ideology. That economic miracle was much more the driving out of ideology, a sophisticated form of exorcism. In exchange for luxury and a degree of certainty, the common man is seduced into forgoing fascism and other totalitarian ideologies. At the same time, one should note that after 1945, particularly in France and Italy, communism was a much realer threat than fascism, insofar as one can speak here of a “threat”. The rather aristocratic supposition that life amounts to wallowing in various forms of luxury became the true and hardly unattractive face of contemporary European pacifism – of Europe itself, I would say.

Not that there was no aversion before 1945 to that heroism, which was in essence a gruesome massacre. I am reminded of the drawings of Otto Dix, who himself served as a volunteer in the German army during the First World War. And it was in 1928 that Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im*

Westen nichts Neues appeared in instalments in the *Vossische Zeitung*. Kurt Vonnegut noted later, and correctly, that the artist who turns against war finds himself faced with a Sisyphean task. To which I would add: artistic anti-war propaganda is always, covertly or involuntarily, also a form of advertisement for war.³

What changed in the second half of the previous century was that the aversion to dying for the political ambitions of others, first formulated by an avant-garde, was transformed into a doctrine of state. This change is best illustrated by the famous comment, attributed to Willy Brandt: “Vom deutschen Boden darf nie wieder Krieg ausgehen.” (Loosely translated: Another war must never arise from German soil.)

What’s more, the German constitution emphatically states that preparations for an “*Angriffskrieg*”, an offensive war, are illegal and to be prosecuted. The mere preparations themselves, *nota bene*. Germany and the EU are not one and the same thing, but it is the German doctrine of state sketched above – without wishing to trivialise the role of France in this – that served as foundation for the European Coal and Steel Community, and with that the attempts at further European unification.

No God, no heroes, no war: that is Europe in the second half of the previous century.⁴ Instead, and all the more: peace, prosperity and entertainment.⁵ The question is: how long can this go on?

To understand the risks accompanying a long period of peace and entertainment, we must turn back to Hostovsky’s *The Mission*, in which Jan says that things must