



# GERMANY AND WORLD WAR I

*Posted on February 1, 2022 by Hugo Münsterberg*



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*This excerpt from Germany and the War, published in 1916,, by Hugo Münsterberg (1863-1916), the German-American psychologist at Harvard, who pioneered applied psychology in law, medicine and education. Contrary to popular opinion, Münsterberg laid out his argument in support of Germany, which made him unpopular in his time. And this work is a very clear and precise justification for nationalism. The work is also theoretical in that it purposes a scheme to end all future wars by instituting the division of land among all nations of the world, or what Münsterberg called "cosmochorism":*

*"The word cosmochorism is formed from the Greek chora, the land. A cosmopolitan order of mankind would be one in which the state loses its individuality; in the cosmochoristic order the nations would retain their state forms, but their land would belong to the whole world. I do think that the transition to socialism is possible and would not even be extremely difficult in our present days. I think that an equal distribution of land for all the peoples on earth without any one people having a right to possession of land would be equally possible. Cosmochorism might be carried out even without externally changing much in the present status. But it would carry with it all those important and thousand times discussed disadvantages of the socialistic system. Most men are still convinced that the evils of capitalism are less than those which a socialistic order would involve. The stimulus which the possession of private and inheritable property has given to the world ought not to be dispensed with. The progress of mankind in the same way needs the possibility of private land possession by the individual nations; it needs the rivalry and I believe that such an anti-territorialistic plan ought ultimately to be defeated, for the same reasons for which the majority of the civilized nations still opposes the socialism of the anti-capitalists. But this is certain: As long as private possession of land by the nations is sanctioned, incessant changes in the size of the territories are needed and must be secured by free competition."*

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This book discusses the essential factors and issues in the European war and their meaning and import for America. The hour for an impersonal account of the war has certainly not yet come, and may not come for a long while. What our time can contribute is the reflection of the great war in the minds of individuals. A story of memories and impressions, of fears and hopes, has today more inner truth than any history of the struggle apparently written with an historian 's coolness. This diary, therefore, views the events as they unfold themselves from week to week, from the angle of personal experiences.

Life has brought me into close contact with much which is essential in this war. Hence my studies may

help toward a better understanding of facts and feelings which are easily misunderstood in America. I publish the book, of which the emphasis lies in the last paper, before the war is ended. Whatever more the struggle may bring refers to outer events, to the harvest of the guns, to victory or defeat. It cannot change the issues with which these pages have to do. They do not speak of soldiers and strategy and the chances of the battlefield; they speak of right and wrong; they speak of eternal values.

War is declared—the extra numbers of the papers shout it through the streets—War is declared. The war is declared. There have been wars as long as mankind remembers, but this is not a war like others. This is the war which will stand out from the world's history like a Titan among the pigmies. This is the war in which undreamed-of armies will storm against each other; the war in which the battles will be fought on land and sea, under the water and high in the air; the war in which the ground of the whole globe will be shaken.

How peaceful was our yesterday! How it was filled with the work and the joy, the good-will and the stress, the pleasantness and the littleness of the passing lackadaisical hours! And suddenly a lightning and a thunder crash and a cry through the world; and we stand in a time of which men will speak through all the future ages. Passions will be ablaze, streams of blood will drench all Europe, temples will fall and sacred treasures will be destroyed, works of art and of science will be thrown in the dust, hundreds of thousands will die and hundreds of millions will suffer—it is an end, and nowhere a beginning.

Is it a terrible nightmare of our dreams? Were these peoples not bound together by innumerable ties of social and moral, economic and cultural intercourse? Were Berlin and Paris and Petersburg and Vienna and Rome and London not the sparkling centers of one great European Fair, hospitable to every guest, glittering with international spirit? Their scholars and writers and painters, their inventors and engineers and social reformers, worked for the world, and the world welcomed them and forgot all boundary lines. The national armies of European civilization marched shoulder to shoulder; was ever a war more unnatural, more superfluous, more horrible, than this sudden clash among friends? Has not a frivolous, reckless militarism won a distressing and scandalous triumph over the powers of culture?

And yet was ever a war more natural, more unavoidable! It is central Europe's desperate defense against the mighty neighbors of east and west who have prepared and prepared for the crushing blow to the Germanic nations. This war had to come sooner or later. Russia spent billions to be ready to push the steam roller of its gigantic population over the German frontier. France armed as no civilized nation

ever armed before; even the educated had to serve three years in the army against the one year's service in Germany. For decades the French did not allow Germany an hour to rest without armor.

Germany's pacific and industrious population had only the one wish: to develop its agricultural and industrial, its cultural and moral resources. It had no desire to expand its frontiers over a new square foot of land in Europe. It aimed to unfold its commerce over the markets of the world and to build up a great national literature and art and science. It became prosperous and even luxurious. But never did the neighbors allow to Germany a pause in its training of patriotic defenders. The neighbors begrudged this prosperity of the fatherland which had been weak and poor and through centuries satisfied with songs and thoughts and dreams. They threatened and threatened by ever increasing armaments. Germany had to spend a vast part of its material and mental income in a hard preparation for defense.

All geographical chances were against the fatherland, which was to be attacked from two sides. Only one advantage was at its disposal. Germany a small territory allows mobilization and concentration in a few days, while Russia needs as many weeks to bring its tremendous hordes to the frontier. Hence Germany's only hope was, in case of Russian mobilization, not to wait until the Russians had completed their movements but to attack as soon as the Czar began to draw up his troops to its boundaries. To delay the German attack after such a Russian order to mobilize would mean to throw away the only chance for defense. Germany was on the lookout. Yet only a few weeks ago, no German, high or low, foresaw that such a decisive move of Russia was so near. All Germany was on a vacation, in the mountains and at the sea. The Emperor was enjoying his yearly summer trip in Norway. Nobody thought of imminent danger until the events overtook the world.

Servians had killed the heir of the Austrian throne and Austria discovered that Serbia itself stood behind the dastardly deed. Austria insisted on a severe punishment of all concerned and sent an ultimatum to Serbia. Belgrade was willing to yield completely to its great neighbor, but at noontime of the day on which the ultimatum was to end, a cipher telegram from Petersburg arrived, and the message of the Russian government to the Servian reversed the mood of the little kingdom. The bellicose Servian Crown Prince, standing in his automobile, drove jubilantly through the excited crowds on the streets, and a few hours later a refusal was sent to Vienna which could mean nothing but war. The Czar had instigated it and was consistent: the Russian empire was to back little Serbia against its foes. He gave orders to mobilize the whole Russian army.

The German Emperor hurried home and found that the Russian troops were being concentrated on the

frontier. He implored the Czar to abstain from this threatening move, and he reminded him of his pledge to his dying grandfather to keep peace with Russia as long as possible; he urged him to consider how Germany had helped the Russian cause in one conflict after another and had allowed Russia to evacuate its eastern frontiers in the war with Japan, pledging peace in the hours of Russia's weakness. But all was of no avail. On the other hand, Austria felt that it could not withdraw from its demands to Servia. If the Servian attacks which culminated in the assassination remained unpunished, the Pan-Slavic agitation at its doors would soon grow to a point at which the Slavic provinces of Austria itself would be inflamed and the whole Austrian empire would break in pieces and become annihilated. This was evidently the hope of Russia, which would gain by it the control of the Balkans and of Constantinopl

The German Emperor nevertheless promised the Czar to urge his Austrian ally toward mediation, if, meanwhile, Russia would only pause in mobilizing the troops. But the Czar was stubborn. His armies were marching on, and as soon as the eastern colossus began to move, at the signal of Russia, France too mobilized at once. No German protest helped. Now Germany knew that the dreaded hour of the twofold attack against its homes had come. It answered with a quick declaration of war. This was the one act which was necessary for Germany's defense. Surely, although Germany made the declaration, this is a war against Germany, and it is a sin against the spirit of history to denounce Germany as the aggressor.

It may be the declaration of war came too late. Perhaps it would have been better if Germany had really had something of the aggressive temper which hostile critics now seek in its deed. Then it would have fallen upon Russia when it was bleeding from the war with Japan. Then it would have turned against France when England was held by its Boer war. But Germany had for more than forty years the one desire to have peace in order to develop its inner energies. Aggression was foreign to its policies and plans.

It allowed all its chances for easy victory to pass. Will it suffer from this persistent peacefulness?

But I trust that the Germans will know how to protect the harvests of their fields. It is true no fanaticism sharpens their sword like those of the rivals; no craving for revenge, no mad longing for new power. The Germans feel admiration for the French genius and have respect for their political aims. The Germans will feel no hatred against England either. To be sure, they think the English selfish, and they have suffered from that selfishness. But they look up to the masterful energy with which England pushes its

world-wide interests of state. There is no nation of Europe with which Germany would like more to live in deepest harmony and peace than with Great Britain. Nor do the Germans grudge the advance of Russia from darkness; they have sympathy with the Russian inner struggles; they love Dostoievsky and Tolstoi. No, Germany's cause would be lost from the start, if only hatred could lead to victory.

But something greater is at stake. Germans are attacked; they must defend their homes and they must defend them against an overwhelming number. Germans know that the fight is not for distant places or for the gains of the mighty, but that they must protect wife and children, and a grim stolid determination will hold them firmly until the hour of decision is over. But they know also what a German defeat must mean to the ideal civilization of the world. The culture of Germany would be trampled down by the half-cultured Tartars. Strategically this may be Germany's war with France and Belgium and England as well as with Russia. But seen from the higher standpoint of cultural world history, it is exclusively a struggle between Russia and Germany. They are truly in an internal conflict. Russia feels that it must gain political predominance over its neighbor in order to win complete control of the Balkan. This is the meaning of the war. France and maybe England are simply making use of Germany's embarrassment and danger in order to tear Alsace-Lorraine and the African colonies and the world commerce from it, while it is forced to wrestle with the eastern giant.

Yet I trust in Germany's armor, even though the enemy is overpowering. I trust in it, because I know that the German army is the whole healthy nation, held together not by a ruler's will nor by the enforced demand of a class but by the one common passionate wish to defend the German land against envy and jealousy. The tradition of a full century from the solemn days of Prussia's liberation from the Napoleonic yoke has ingrained in every heart this devotion to the army. Moreover, Germany has to a high degree overcome the apparent conflict which made the other enlightened nations suffer: the conflict between militarism and culture. It made the training in the army an educative schooling of the whole population for efficiency in every line of national work. The service in barrack and camp became a time of personal happiness, of social growth, of vocational advance. Army and nation became one as in no other land.

Finally, the German masses may not be quick and versatile but they are thorough and persistent. German thoroughness has carried the day on the battlefields of science and scholarship; it cannot have failed in the maneuver fields where the war of the future was prepared. The Germans who must fight today have been brought up under the shadow of the feeling that revengeful neighbors were waiting for the hour to burn their villages and their towns; they have never been relieved from this tension; they

knew that they had to keep the edge of the German sword sharp. It became an organic part of their life.

Most Americans cannot think themselves into this German sentiment. They fancy that the workingman and the man behind the plow, the business man and the university man, hate and despise the army and that the government today is forcing the rifle to their shoulders. The Americans of our time have never known the dread that the neighbors may tomorrow break into their homes and destroy the happiness of their hearths. Spain and Mexico were intermezzos, no dangers: excitements, but not deepest life concerns. But every German has known it otherwise from his childhood days.

Nature formed from its clay no creature with more peaceful instincts than myself; yet the thought of the army was intertwined with every phase of my life. It is almost typical that the earliest memory of my mind and the earliest preserved writing of my pen referred to war. Indeed, my conscious life begins with the vivid image of the scene when victorious hussars came back in 1866 from the battlefields of the short Prussian war with Austria. I was just three years old, and I see still how my parents held me on the window-sill and gave me a wreath to throw down on the riders when they came home from victory. The strong emotion must have impressed the picture on my consciousness, as I cannot remember anything before. And the first writing which was kept from my childhood was a childish poem written in 1870 when I was seven years of age, on the day of the declaration of war between Germany and France. It began in the German rhymes: *Der Krieg ist erklart; in die Hand nun das Schwert*—The war is declared; take the sword in hand. I could not foresee that forty-four years later, far beyond the sea, I would have to begin once more my diary page—The war is declared.

With these two wars which my personal memory still embraces, the events began which led to the combinations of the present war. In 1866 Prussia's predominant role in Germany was decided, but with a sure instinct for future needs, at the same time the political bridges were built on which Prussia and Austria could meet for the firm alliance of today. The war of 1870, recklessly stirred by the intolerance of imperial France, created the German empire, but at the same time it left in republican France that blind striving for the lost provinces which has controlled all its policies since that time. Again and again France threatened its neighbor with its warlike steps. I remember well in the early 'eighties, when I was a student in Heidelberg and the elections for the Reichstag were near, how our street corners were placarded with diagrams of fortresses and regiments showing the alarming growth of French preparations. There was no other talk among us students but the war which the French restlessness would force upon us. This feeling was aggravated when Russia's political ill will toward Germany became more violent. Soon came the time when we all were inspired by Bismarck's words, "We

Germans fear God and no one else in the world." They echoed in every German heart and it was felt that they were meant for both the French and the Russian neighbor. The danger never disappeared. Sometimes the tension became almost intolerable. Now the explosion has come. The Czar has decreed the war. France uses the long-hoped-for hour of Germany's danger. Germany is attacked on both sides; Germany is forced to fight; Germany must win or perish. But whoever wins, whoever loses, all Europe will suffer.

The last day which I spent in Europe, summer before last, I was in the ruins of Pompeii. When the ship left the European coast, a dark cloud was hanging over Vesuvius and it looked as if the crater might break and endless masses of lava once more flood over the gay, flourishing villages. All the peoples of Europe have settled and toiled on the slopes of Vesuvius, and the crater has erupted, and the glowing torrent is again pouring over the homes of peaceful men. Will Europe, the beautiful, become a great Pompeii?

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If the armies of six nations join to make war on two, the moral qualities of the war are pushed into the background. Three football teams against one would be no real test for the outnumbered party. The allied nations cannot prove any higher qualities and therefore cannot possibly earn any honors in this European Avar, as their final victory would mean only a quantitative superiority, the power of inexhaustible combined resources. If one stood against one, if France and Germany were left to fight the war alone, nobody could even now, only five weeks after the declaration, have any doubt that the energies of the German empire proved much superior to those of the French republic: the army stands near the gates of Paris and no French soldier is on German soil in spite of Belgian and English help. If it were only a Franco-German War, as a generation ago, France would be completely defeated today. When future historians study the underlying conditions and factors of this European war, they will, no doubt, recognize that this superiority of the German army indeed does not result from a merely outer professional war technique, but comes because the German army is the embodiment of the national soul with all its intellectual and moral energies.

It is the same soul which in peaceful hours works toward science and industry, toward literature and social reform. "With scientific exactitude every detail of the campaigns has been worked out and prepared; with unflinching thoroughness the strategical ideas have been carried through; with iron self-discipline the millions have been forged together into one powerful machine; with unswerving loyalty

the nation has rallied to its leader and has stood by its ally; with moral enthusiasm the whole people have known only the one thought: to sacrifice all for right and for honor. The true story is nowhere better told, nowhere more sincerely and without any retouching than in the personal letters which friend writes to friend. Nothing there is made up for public use. They are documents of spontaneous emotion. It is marvelous how they agree in their view of the situation and as to the temper of the German people. I have before me the letter of a young man in the Rhine valley to his American fiancée. The handwriting shows his inner excitement. I may render a translation here, as it is so typical.

*"You simply cannot imagine how sad and yet how inspiring everything here is. Since an hour ago I have known that England too has declared war on us. It will be a struggle of life and death. From all sides they fall upon us. We might have left Austria alone; then we should have had peace. And yet not a single man wavered even for a second when the question came to us whether we ought loyally to keep faith with Austria or not. Our people is going into this war with such moral earnestness and is so deeply impressed with the feeling of its right and of its duty and with such indignation at the frivolous, long prepared breach of peace and the deceitfulness of our enemies that you cannot imagine it at all. The people rises with its tasks to a tremendous height; men become better and nobler; all the good instincts become wide awake. No faintheartedness—no narrowmindedness—no timidity, but at the same time no boasting, no arrogance! Everything is done with a quiet, earnest feeling of responsibility."*

It is inspiring to see this enthusiasm, with which all hurry to the standards, to hear those roaring cheers with which they are brought to the railway trains which go to the front. Even the poorest give every bit which they have. There are no longer any political parties in Germany; all are one. Then again you see scenes which make your heart break. I saw yesterday a mother who took leave of five sons. Women and children hang weeping upon the father of the family, whom the fatherland calls.

But everyone feels: we shall win—because we have not only the might but the right on our side. This will be the most terrible war which the world has ever seen. Hundreds of thousands will have to die, and a tremendous sorrow will go through the lands. But we shall win over unscrupulous force, over hatred and envy.

When you receive this letter the first battles will have been fought. At this time the mobilization of our armies is going on in perfect calmness. All is running smoothly like a machine. We shall send millions into the field. The sons of the Emperor and of all the other German princes go to the front, many as simple lieutenants. I myself have not served in the army and should be called only if the last man is

needed. But I shall certainly not wait until that time comes. Tomorrow I shall put myself with my motor car at the disposal of the army and hope sincerely that there will be use for me. You will not blame me for it, I am sure. I love life a hundred times more since I have found you, but here the fatherland calls me.

Writer on writer says exactly the same. This morning I got from my best friend in Berlin a letter which begins as follows:

War! The years of our youth were inspired by the ideas of the great time which created the German empire. Today a new *furor Teutonicus* has burst out. To live through this is worth a lifetime.

Our nation has been torn from the deepest peace and we have seen a rising of the people such as the world has never seen before. Every German felt that the existence of Germany as a cultural world energy was at stake. With a solemn enthusiasm, without oratory and without jingoism, the whole nation stood by the Kaiser like one man. There were no longer any Catholics or any Social Democrats, not even Poles and Alsations, but only Germans. They felt themselves as bearers of civilization against the barbaric Pan-Slavism, as bearers of ideals against the selfish commercial spirit of England, as bearers of sober efficiency against the phrases of France. There was not a single deserter, and millions of volunteers. Everyone wanted to offer his life. This iron will to win must lead to victory. In Germany not a soul thinks of the possibility of a defeat. The spirit which animates the whole nation is simply marvelous and admirable. There is no reckless overconfidence, no drunkenness of spirit, but a sober, proud consciousness of inner strength and of a righteous cause.

Indeed every letter reiterates this moral enthusiasm, this new inner unity of the nation, and one thing above all, the tremendous increase of the monarchical conviction. The complete failure of the American press to grasp the true historic meaning of this war and its inner consequences will later be recognized perhaps in no point more strongly than in the absurd persistency with which it repeats the prophecy that the war will weaken the monarchical idea and create a popular desire for an imitation of republican government. So far only one great historic fact stands out, that the German nation and the Emperor were never more one than since the hour when the war against Russia broke out, and that in the twenty-seven years of the Kaiser's reign the love for the Emperor and the conviction that the monarchical state form is the ideal form of government for the great German nation was never so deep and penetrating as today.

It is as if the great leaders of the German nation had risen from their graves, Bismarck and Moltke planning again in the headquarters of state and army. It is as if Schiller had come to life and was inspiring with his ethical idealism the troops which are defending their home land in the west, as if he called to them once more: Infamous is the nation which is not ready to give everything for its honor... And it is as if at the eastern frontier at the town of Konigsberg a little old-fashioned man had left the grave, Immanuel Kant, and whispered into the heart of everyone: There is only one thing worth while in life, and that is the moral will. And all are ready to give their lives to protect those boundaries against the Russian onslaught. Never was the moral will of the nation more alive and more pure.

Even the poems of the day affirm it in all its solemnity. Everyone has read those English poems cabled over the world which the war has brought forth. But all which they had to say was boastful pride in England and hatred for the enemy. No tone of that kind was heard in Germany. One poem after another is filled with the moral meaning of the world event. The controlling idea is that of self-discipline. We have taken life too lightly; we have lived too much for the joys of the day, and the pomp of the outer world; now the hour of sacrifice and of need and of sadness has come to us. May it make us purer in heart and deeper in thought and more ideal in action. The whole meaning of life is to do one's duty, and suffering may help us to become better. I may pick out of many similar songs one by [Richard Dehmel](#). I know he has always felt the pulse-beat of the German nation. My daughter translated his short poem. It may be the closing word of this first part of my little diary:

Hour of steel, thou art a blessing  
That at last unites us all.  
Friend and foe, still peace caressing, Trembled in suspicion's thrall.

Now comes the fight,

The honest fight!

Greed with blunted claw has meanly Bartered for its pomp and lust;  
Now we all are feeling keenly  
^hat can save our souls from dust:

The hour of need.

Of blessed need!

Truth will blaze, through darkness smiting, Over dust and powder's smoke.  
Not for life we men are fighting—  
Fighting till the fatal stroke:

For then comes death,

Divinest death!

Led by faith, thy land defending,  
People, for thy spirit fight,  
Heroes' blood for honor spending!  
Sacrifice be our delight—

Then victory,

Hail victory!

The first papers of this diary were written in the first days of the war. They were based, of course, on the knowledge available at that time. I have not changed them afterwards, because I wanted to preserve the inner truth of the immediate impressions. But attention ought to be drawn to one point which now appears entirely different.

I have emphasized that the war was forced on Germany but acknowledged that technically Germany declared the war. We know now that even this is not the case. Even the technical war-making was begun by Russia and France. The Russian and French troops crossed the frontiers and made prisoners before Germany took any warlike step. After Russia's actual starting of the war, Germany simply declared in its ultimatum that if these hostile movements did not stop at once it would consider itself in a state of war. They did not stop and, therefore, Germany withdrew its ambassadors.

Since it has become absolutely clear that the war was started by Russia and France and that Germany

was in no way responsible, the anti-German press has suddenly discovered that the question of the origin of the war is very unimportant. Historians will judge otherwise. They will be unwilling to disburden the allies so easily. It is very important to understand who started this war of wars and to know that Germany was loyal to her policy of peace till the enemies actually crossed her frontiers.

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*Featured image: "Germania," by Philipp Veit, painted in 1848.*

