

Merchants and Heroes

Patriotic Meditations

By Werner Sombart

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First Chapter: The War of Beliefs [Der Glaubenskrieg]

All great wars are Wars of Beliefs, they have been in the past, they are at present and they will be in the future. In earlier times combatants were conscious of this: if Emperor Charles struggled against the Saxons, if the “Franks” set off to free the Holy Sepulcher, if the invading Turks were beaten back, if the German Emperor protected his realm against the Italian cities, if the Protestants and Catholics fought for predominance during the time of the Reformation; those who prosecuted these wars were always aware that they fought for beliefs, and we, we who look to the past to seek to understand the world historical meaning of this war, we understand that every feeling and thought of the combatants come from deep foundations.

Even the Napoleonic Wars were interpreted by the best people of the period as nothing other than Wars of Beliefs.

Thus judged the most recent biographer of Freiherr von Stein, whose views on the Congress of Vienna were certainly true, when he said: Freiherr von Stein regarded the entire event not as a power struggle but as a struggle between evil and good.

In the ages of Nation States and Capitalism lie deeper oppositions, not those on the surface, that in the great, in the World Wars, reach a conclusion. It would seem far more that the only grounds for conflict are simple power struggles or conflicts over economic interests. And the driving forces want it to be so. But this would mean remaining clinging to the surface. One wants to go beneath the surface and the simplest understandings and visible reasons of the War of our time, and above all of the holy war that Germany now faces against a world of enemies, to recognize the deeper oppositions that lie in the struggle, and which in turn are nothing other than oppositions of belief or, as we now take care to say: they are oppositions of world views [Weltanschauung].

It is apparent that in the present World War a number of different separate conflicts are being worked out. There are localized wars, such as that between Russia and Turkey over the occupation of the Dardanelles, or France and Germany over Alsace-Lorraine, or Austria-Hungary and Russia over the domination of the Balkans. The main war is another matter. Our opponents have understood this very clearly, and they have declared to the world: The war is between “Western European Civilization” and “The Ideas of 1789” on the one hand and German “Militarism,” and German “Barbarism” on the other. In fact here the deep contrast is correctly articulated. I would like only to pose them somewhat differently when I say: The war is between Merchants and Heroes, mercantile and heroic worldviews and their corresponding cultures. For this reason, with these expressions I will try to single

out, and the following exposition will demonstrate, the very deep, all-encompassing opposing attitude and experience of the world [der Weltbetrachtung und des Welterlebens].

Here I want to warn against an error, that I am using the terms Merchant and Hero in a vocational sense. That is naturally not the case and cannot be so when I use these impressions as oppositional Worldviews. These are not necessarily bound to particular vocations. The terms refer rather to a Mercantile or Heroic attitude [Gesinnung], and it is perfectly possible that someone whose fate it is to deal in pepper and raisins is a hero (according to his cast of mind), while we experience on a daily basis a Minister of War who is a “merchant,” since he has the soul of a grocer and not a warrior.*

A worldview belongs first of all to an individual person, and thus merchant-souls and hero-souls [Haendlerseelen und Heldenseelen] live side by side in the same People, in the same city. I claim, however, that there exists a war between Peoples [Voelkerkrieg] over worldviews and thus further claim that Merchants and Heroes are at war. Accordingly, we can characterize entire Peoples in one or the other sense. It happens that we aspire to capture the soul, the spirit, the essence of a People. This “People’s Soul” [Volksseele], this “People’s Spirit” [Volksgeist] – we can apprehend it metaphysically or purely empirically – is in any case a Something [ein Etwas], whose reality cannot be denied, that it has an independent existence next to and over all individual members of a People, that would remain, even though all people died, that up to a particular point it can assert itself independently against the living individual person. This People’s Soul springs out of the thousand particularities of a People (and must be recognized differently for each People): from philosophy and art, from State and politics, from morals and habits.

In this sense Peoples can be distinguished as Merchant-Peoples and Hero-Peoples, and in this way stand mercantile and heroic worldviews in a struggle for domination in this Great War. Their carriers, the Peoples who represent this opposition, are the English and the Germans. And only as an Anglo-German war does the World War of 1914 receive its deeper world-historical meaning. But the important question for Humanity [Menscheitsfrage] that now presents itself for decision is not about who will rule the seas; much more important and pertaining to human destiny is the question: Which spirit will prove itself to be the stronger: the Mercantile or the Heroic.

Therefore, we must bring this contradistinction, the deepest and broadest in the world, to completely clear awareness. And in order to assist is the task of this written work in which I want to describe in a straightforward manner, first the English then the German spirit and then weigh them against each other, to put before the soul the incomparable superiority of the German spirit of the German reader – I write for no others – from which he can again become joyful over his Germaness.

* Sombart may be referring to Adolf Wild von Hohenborn, Minister of War from 1915 to 1916. He had formerly been the army’s Quartermaster General.