

THE XXth CENTURY

Vol. II

JANUARY 1942

No. 1

THE WORLD AT WAR

By KLAUS MEHNERT

For the first time in the history of man, fighting rages over all the latitudes and longitudes of the globe. All the Five Continents and all the Seven Seas are involved. There is hardly a neutral state left. If we define neutrality as being the ability of a country to choose one of three possibilities—to stay out of the war, to join one side, or to join the other—the term would only apply today to one or two European and some of the South American states. The other nations are either in the war or determined in their political decisions by one of the two warring camps. Nobody can escape from the impact of war. Even the proverbially happy islands of the South Seas have experienced the rain of death. We are all in it now.

The absence of powerful neutrals has, during the last few days, brought a grim clarity into international affairs. All the players are in the game and all the cards on the table. Nobody can back out. Diplomacy has exhausted its possibilities—tanks, dive bombers, and submarines are speaking in its place. In every nation now it is the same—too many unemployed diplomats recalled from their posts and never enough bomber pilots and tank drivers.

New Year's Eve, 1941. This is the time, if ever there was one, to go out into the night, a night pregnant with historical events, to watch the starry sky and to contemplate where the world and each one of us is standing in this Great Divide between 1941 and 1942.

The world at war, often used as a phrase, is now a terrible reality. Some fifty or more million men are under arms, either engaged in the business

of death or preparing for it, and over a thousand million people behind them are thinking only of them and in terms of war. Some wanted war and profit by it, some oppose it and face court-martial. But the great majority in all nations consider war a grim necessity which they did not want and which they do not like, but which they have to go through with. It is of these I am thinking in this New Year's night. I know only a small number of them in Europe and the Far East, in America and Russia. Yet I feel certain that in this night and in the days since Japan and the USA entered the war, countless men and women in all countries, in trenches or in their homes, in prison camps or on the high seas, are thinking of the meaning of a world at war.

Has it any meaning? Is it nothing but senseless chaos? War on a scale unlike anything in human history—is it the end of all things? Now more than ever we must face these questions, not in a mood of despair, but with calm clarity.

* * *

A few years after the end of the first World War—I was then a student at the University of Munich and, with a knapsack on my back, on my way to an international student conference in England—I spent a week in Belgium. I visited the art galleries of Brussels and the churches and altars of Ghent and Bruges and finally I went to Ypres. A bus took me to Langemarck. It was in the afternoon. I engaged a room in the small inn, left my pack, and went out into the fields, my first visit to the battlefields of the war.

The country looked strange. All the houses were new, built of bright red brick, for the battles of Flanders had left not a single building intact. All the trees were young, not much taller than myself, planted after all the old ones had been uprooted by shells. There were endless cemeteries, and tall war memorials along the way. And while night was falling I stood where in 1914 the German student regiments, the flower of young German manhood, had attacked and gone singing to their death. Like millions of others on both sides of the trenches they had not wanted the war, but had been doing what they considered their duty, and had sacrificed their lives.

The bells of the little new church in the near-by village were tolling. People were going home from work. The crops stood well, their green just turning to gold. The earth that had been plowed by grenades for long years was feeding man again as if he had never torn every square foot of her with bursting steel. Only here and there concrete blocks of blasted pillboxes still interrupted the smoothness of the fields. Then the first stars came out and lights were turned on in the village. I thought of the misery which the death of millions of fathers, husbands, and brothers had brought to millions of families; of my defeated Fatherland in its poverty, despair, and inner chaos; of the grave difficulties which the victor countries were experiencing at the same time. And later at the inn, in the simply furnished room, I sat alone by candlelight and hammered all my emotions into my little typewriter, asking desperately and vainly for the meaning of the war and its sacrifices, starting and ending each sentence with WHY? until my neighbor knocked on the wall and said he wanted to sleep.

* * *

Today I feel differently, about the last war and the present one. Perhaps because I am older, but mainly because for all of us the last twenty years have been an extraordinary lesson in

history, teaching us to see men and events in a wider perspective. To me, and I feel certain to many others, this war is not just a matter of defending or expanding one's frontiers, of preserving one's standard of living or attaining a higher one; it is rather a gigantic contest for the shaping of the next phase in human development. A new world is being born in blood and pain. What it will be like, nobody knows. And to the question whether it will be better or worse than the old one, I would suggest that the issue goes far deeper than that. Take two periods of the past, the feudalistic and the capitalistic—be it in Japan or in Europe. Was feudalism or capitalism the better? Who has the yardstick to measure good and bad? For some, life under feudalism was better—for the samurai and the daimyo, for the knight and the duke, for the guildmaster and the highwayman. For others life was better under capitalism—for the owner of capital, the scientist, the trade union boss, the manager.

It is not a matter of better or worse, but of difference. It is the question of one phase coming to a close and another being started. And as at the birth of a child each tortured muscle and nerve of the mother protests, thus all of us are suffering, caught in the terrible vortex of new creation. The more highly developed is the new creature being born, the longer and more violent are the birth pangs. Hence we must expect that our sufferings will be greater than those of the past. The change from feudalism to capitalism lasted from the Bastille in 1789 to the completion of the Meiji Restoration in 1871; ours began in 1914—and the end is not yet in sight.

The great majority of this magazine's readers have probably one thing in common: they have spent part of their lives outside the boundaries of their own countries—English-speaking Japanese, Chinese, and Europeans, or Americans and Englishmen living in the Orient. They are therefore less likely than those of their

countrymen, who have always stayed at home, to see everything in black and white. They have had at least glimpses of the other side, they know that those in the other camp are also following ideas and ideals in taking up arms. They may not like these ideals, but few will deny their existence. We know, there will always be some whose actions in war are motivated by greed or fear; but the majority are doing what they consider their duty. Is it not possible to find a language understandable to all of them? We can try.

* * *

Although man has remained fundamentally the same over centuries, the forms of human life have changed again and again, and certain forms, after serving well for a time, have become outmoded, useless—worse: a dead weight around our necks. Having lived in Germany, Russia, America, and more recently in the Orient, I believe that by 1930 the outdatedness of certain forms of our past life was agreed upon by the majority of thinking people everywhere:

First, the injustice of a social order which, based on unrestrained economic liberalism, created the extremes of rich and poor, exploitation of the many by the few, armies of unemployed, disastrous crises, economic disorder, and bitter warfare between the classes.

Secondly, the injustice of an international order which, based on political conditions that have long passed into oblivion, created the extremes of "have" and "have-not" nations, the "haves" in control of colonial and semi-colonial millions and surrounded by selfish tariff walls, and the "have-nots" with a desperate lack of living space and a threatened standard of living.

As both sides were theoretically agreed on the necessity of changing these evils, an evolutionary and peaceful adjustment should have been possible—theoretically. In reality it was not. To the nations which have since become the Axis powers, the adjustment was

urgent and a matter of life and death; the others, primarily the Anglo-American nations, were highly reluctant to change theory into fact. When the Axis nations, tired of waiting and promises, proceeded to alter the conditions by a political revolution, they were opposed. First local wars, then the present World War were the result. It may sound paradoxical to many, but one might go so far as to say that the majority of people on both sides still agree fundamentally as to the forms of our future life, and that the war is being fought over the tempo and methods of the change, not over the necessity of the change itself.

To this many will object: "That is not true, the issue is clear, it is that between democracy and totalitarianism." But totalitarianism is not the aim of the Axis nations, it is their method, it is a weapon in their fight, just as are panzer divisions and stukas—and all these weapons, whether panzers or totalitarianism, because they have proved their superiority in warfare, are rapidly being adopted by England and America. The same is true with regard to any other "issues" which one might quote to prove a fundamental difference. "The Axis powers are invading countries without warning," some will say, "there you see a difference between the two camps." Again I say, it is only a question of method, and again of a method which the others, because of its success, have adopted, probably with less reason, in Iraq, in Iceland, in Iran, in Timor. "You have concentration camps and executions," others will say. But the fact is that Germany and Italy, unlike America or England, have recently undergone political revolutions and that revolutionary times always lead to extraordinary measures.

Any amount of "issues" could be mentioned in an attempt to prove the fundamental difference between the ideas of the people in the two camps. I believe that they are differences in strategy only and that, as the war goes on, the Anglo-American side will

more and more adopt Axis strategies. *The really important thing is that they are all measures of the present war, not of the future peace.* The average Japanese or German does not wish, any more than the average American or Englishman, to live, in normal times, under conditions and with methods which he accepts as necessary in times of revolution and war. The task of the future will be to find a synthesis between the necessities of the group and the freedom of each of us. For no amount of discipline will alter the fact that we are all individuals.

There is one important difference, the existence of which I will not deny. The Anglo-American camp wished to preserve the *status quo* as long as possible. This is natural since it is the beneficiary of it. The other camp, just as naturally, wished to change it. But the *status quo* in itself is only a prevailing circumstance, not a principle or idea. History has shown again and again that it is a weak and unreliable support for political claims.

* * *

Opponents in war are likely to emphasize the sinister sides of the enemy, and much of what the democracies criticize about the Axis powers—soldierly style of life, military occupation of other countries, executions of hostages in retaliation etc.—are but the temporary results of warfare or war preparation, not the permanent attributes of future peace.

In any contest between worthy opponents—be it between two philosophers or two philosophies—each side influences the other, even though they may not realize it. One of the chief objections of the Anglo-American nations to the Axis peoples is what they call their “narrow nationalism.” Yet to anyone who has followed carefully the words and actions of Japan, Germany, and Italy in the past years, the trend away from this “narrow

nationalism” is unmistakable. The Japanese—this can best be seen in North China—are thinking more and more in terms of East Asia, the Italians and Germans in terms of Europe. What to many, perhaps, seemed in the beginning a matter of domination over obeying inferiors, now appears increasingly as leadership among co-operating equals. The extended living, for example, of millions of German soldiers, administrators, railway workers, and others on foreign soil cannot but widen their horizon and vision and increase their appreciation for the human beings of the other side.

On the other hand, one of the main criticisms on the part of Axis nationals against the democracies is the lack of social responsibility, the excessive power of money in these countries. Here too, under the impact of events on the other side of the fence, changes are undeniable. Few doubt that the England or America of the future—irrespective of the outcome of the war—will be socially very different from those that existed until a few years ago, and that this difference will be largely due to the contest with their adversaries.

* * *

It is understandable that in times of war the hatred of warring nations must lead to an emphasis of all that is different between them. But it is the endeavor of this magazine—which begins its second volume today to coincide with the calendar year—to stress what is common rather than what is different. It tries to point out the place which this war has in history and to show that, far from being the end of the world, it is but the start of a new phase in human development. It wishes to use, in these days of war, the language of reason, to help in preserving something of the spirit of human understanding and friendliness which we will desperately need in order to make the future transition from war to peace not unduly long.