



Source: *Thomas Carlye over den oorlog* (Utrecht: Oosthoek, 1918)



## Letter to *The Times* in support of Germany

Thomas Carlyle<sup>1</sup>

*To the Editor of the Times.*

Chelsea, 11 Nov. 1870

Sir, - It is probably an amiable trait of human nature, this cheap pity and newspaper lamentation over fallen and afflicted France; but it seems to me a very idle, dangerous, and misguided feeling, as applied to the cession of Alsace and Lorraine by France to her German conquerors; and argues, on the part of England, a most profound ignorance as to the mutual history of France and Germany, and the conduct of France towards that Country, for long centuries back. The question for the Germans, in this crisis, is not one of “magnanimity”, of “heroic pity and forgiveness to a fallen foe”, but of solid prudence, and practical consideration what the fallen foe will, in all likelihood, do when once on his feet again.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), an admirer of Germany, had translated Goethe and Jean Paul, and had written a lengthy biography of Frederick the Great (1858-65); by 1870 he was an elder statesman of English letters. His open letter against France and in support of Germany was eagerly quoted and republished in translation in Germany; Carlyle was given the highest Prussian order, *Pour le Mérite*, in 1874. [SPIN note]

Written on her memory, in a dismally instructive manner, Germany has an experience of 400 years on this point; of which on the English memory, if it ever was recorded there, there is now little or no trace visible.

Does any of us know, for instance with the least precision, or in fact know at all, the reciprocal procedures, the mutual history as we call it, of Louis XI, and Kaiser Max? Max, in his old age, put down, in chivalrous allegorical or emblematic style, a wonderful record of these things, The *Weisse König* (“White King”, as he called himself; “Red King”, or perhaps “Black”, being Louis’s adumbrative title); adding many fine engravings by the best artist of his time: for the sake of these prints, here and there an English collector may possess a copy of the book; but I doubt if any Englishman has ever read it, or could, for want of other reading on the subject, understand any a part of it. Old Louis’s quarrel with the Chief of Germany, at that time, was not unlike this last one of a younger Louis: “You accursed Head of Germany, you have been prospering in the world lately, and I not; have at you, then, with fire and sword!” But it ended more successfully for old Louis and his French than I hope the present quarrel will. The end, at that time, was, that opulent, noble Burgundy did not get re-united to her old Teutonic mother, but to France, her grasping stepmother, and remains French to this day.

Max’s grandson and successor, Charles V, was hardly luckier than Max in his road-companion and contemporary French King. Francis I, not content with France for a kingdom, began by trying to be elected German Kaiser as well; and never could completely digest his disappointment in that fine enterprise. He smoothed his young face, however; swore eternal friendship with the young Charles who had beaten him; and, a few months after, had egged-on the poor little Duke of Bouillon, the Reich’s and Charles’s vassal, to refuse homage in that quarter, and was in hot war with Charles. The rest of his



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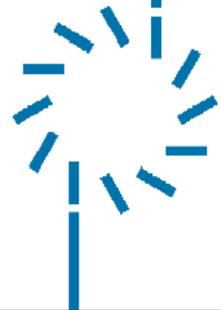
earthly existence was a perpetual haggle of broken treaties, and ever-recurring war and injury with Charles V; – a series, withal, of intrusive interferences with Germany, and every German trouble that arose, to the worsening and widening of them all, not to the closing or healing of any one of them. A terrible journey these two had together, and a terrible time they made out for Germany between them, and for France too, though not by any means in a like degree. The exact deserts of his Most Christian Majesty Francis I in covenanting with Sultan Soliman, – that is to say, in letting loose he then quasi-infernal roaring-lion of a Turk (then in the height of his sanguinary fury and fanaticism, not sunk to caput mortuum and a torpid nuisance as now) upon Christendom and the German Empire, I do not pretend to me, no modern imagination can conceive this atrocity of the Most Christian King; or how it harassed, and haunted with incessant terror, the Christian nations for two centuries ensuing.

Richelieu's trade, again, was twofold: first, what everybody, must acknowledge was a great and legitimate one, that of coercing and drilling into obedience to their own Sovereign the vassals of the Crown of France; and secondly, that of plundering, weakening, thwarting, and in all ways tormenting the German Empire. "He protected Protestantism there?" Yes, and steadily persecuted his own Huguenots, bombarded his own Rochelle; and in Germany kept up a Thirty-Years War, cherishing diligently the last embers of it till Germany were burnt to utter ruin; no nation ever nearer absolute ruin than unhappy Germany than was. An unblessed Richelieu for Germany; nor a blessed for France either, if we look to the ulterior issues, and distinguish the solid from the specious in the fortune of Nations. No French ruler, not even Napoleon I, was a feller or crueller enemy to Germany, nor half so pernicious to it (to its very soul as well as to its body); and Germany had done him no injury that I know of, except that of existing beside him.

Of Louis XIV's four grand plundering and incendiarism of Europe, - for no real reason but his own ambition, and desire to snatch his neighbour's goods, - of all this we of this age have now, if any, an altogether faint and placid remembrance, and our feelings on it differ greatly from those that animated our poor forefathers in the time of William III, and Queen Anne. Of Bellisle and Louis XV's fine scheme to cut Germany into four little kingdoms, and have them dance and have them dance and fence to the piping of Versailles, I do not speak; for to France herself this latter fine scheme brought its own reward: loss of America, loss of India, disgrace and discomfiture in all quarters of the world, - advent, in fine, of The French Revolution; embarkation on the shoreless chaos on which ill-fated France still drifts and tumbles.

The Revolution and Napoleon I, and their treatment of Germany, are still in the memory of men and newspapers; but that was not by any means, as idle men and newspapers seem to think, the first of Germany's sufferings from France; it was the last of a very long series of such, - the last but one, let us rather say; and hope that this now going on as "Siege of Paris", as wide-spread empire of bloodshed, anarchy, delirium, and mendacity, the fruit of France's latest "marche à Berlin" may be the last! No nation ever had so bad a neighbor as Germany has had in France for the last 400 years; bad in all manner of ways; insolent, rapacious, insatiable, unappeasable, continually aggressive.

And now, furthermore, in all History, there is no insolent, unjust neighbor that ever got so complete, instantaneous, and ignominious a smashing-down as France has now got from Germany. Germany, after 400 years of ill-usage, and generally of ill-fortune, from that neighbor, has had at last the great happiness to see its enemy fairly down in his manner: - and Germany, I do clearly believe, would be a foolish nation not to



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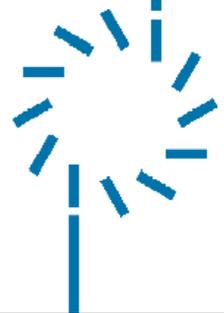


think of raising up some secure boundary-fence between herself and such a neighbor, now that she has the chance.

There is no law of Nature that I know of, no Heaven's Act of Parliament, whereby France, alone of terrestrial beings, shall not restore any portion of her plundered goods when the owners they were wrenched from have an opportunity upon them. To nobody, except to France herself for the moment, can it be credible that there is such a law of Nature. Alsace and Lorraine were not got, either of them, in so divine a manner as to render that a probability. The cunning of Richelieu, the grandiose long-sword of Louis XIV, these are the only titles of France to those German countries. Richelieu screwed them loose (and, by happy accident, there was a Turenne, as General, got screwed along with them; - Turenne, I think, was mainly German by blood and temper, had not Francis I egged-on his ancestor, the little Duke of Bouillon, in the way we saw, and gradually made him French); Louis le Grand, with his Turenne as supreme of modern Generals, managed the rest of the operation, - except indeed, I should say, the burning of the Palatinate, from Heidelberg Palace steadily downwards, into black ruin; which Turenne would not do sufficiently, and which Louis had to get done by another. There was also a good deal of extortionate law-practice, what we may fairly call violently sharp attorneyism, put in use. The great Louis's "Chambres de Réunion", Metz Chamber, Brissac Chamber, were once of high infamy, and much complained of here in England, and everywhere else beyond the Rhine. The Grand Louis, except by sublime gesture, ironically polite, made no answer. He styled himself, on his very coins (écu of 1687, say the Medallists), *Excelsus super omnes gentes Dominus*; but it is certain, attorneyism of the worst sort was one of his instruments in this conquest of Alsace. Nay, as to Strasburg, it was not even attorneyism, much less a long-sword, that did the feat; it was a house-breaker's jimmy on the part of the Grand Monarque. Strasburg was got in time of profound peace by bribing of the magistrates to do treason, on his part, and admit his garrison one night.

Nor as to Metz la Pucelle, nor any of these Three Bishoprics, was it force of war that brought them over to France; rather it was force of fraudulent pawn-broking. King Henri II (year 1552) got these places, - Protestants applying to him in their extreme need, - as we may say, in the way of pledge. Henri entered there with banners spread and drums beating, "solely in defence of German liberty, as God shall witness"; did nothing for Protestantism or German liberty (German liberty managing rapidly to help itself in this instance); and then, like a brazen-faced unjust pawnbroker, refused to give the places back, - had "ancient rights over them", extremely indubitable to him, and could not give them back. And never yet, by any pressure or persuasion, would. The great Charles V, Protestantism itself now supporting, endeavored, with his utmost energy and to the very cracking of his heart, to compel him; but could not. The present Hohenzollern King, a modest and pacific man in comparison, could and has, I believe it to be perfectly just, rational and wise that Germany should take these countries home with her from her unexampled campaign; and, by well fortifying her own old Wasgau ("Voges"), Hundsrück ("Dog'sback"), Three Bishoprics, and other military strengths, secure herself in time coming against French visits.

The French complain dreadfully of threatened "loss of honour"; and lamentable bystanders pleaded earnestly, "Don't dishonour France; leave poor France's honour bright." But will it save the honour of France to refuse paying for the glass she has voluntarily broken in her neighbour's windows? The attack upon the windows was her dishonour. Signally disgraceful to any nation was her late assault on Germany; equally signal has been the ignominy of its execution on the part of France. The honour of France can be saved only by the deep repentance of France; and by the serious determination never to do so again, - to do the reserve of so forever henceforth. In that way may the honour of France again gradually brighten to the height of



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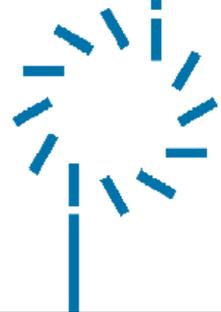


its old splendor, - far beyond the First Napoleonic, much more the Third, or any recent sort, - and offer again to our voluntary love and grateful estimation all the fine and graceful qualities Nature has implanted in the French.

For the present, I must say, France looks more and more delirious, miserable, blamable, pitiable and even contemptible. She refuses to see the facts that are lying palpable before her face, and the penalties she has brought upon herself. A France scattered into anarchic ruin, without recognizable head; head, or chief, indistinguishable from feet, or rabble; Ministers flying up in balloons ballasted with nothing but outrageous public lies, proclamations of victories that were creatures of the fancy; a Government subsisting altogether on mendacity, willing that horrid bloodshed should continue and increase rather than that they, beautiful Republican creatures, should cease to have the guidance of it: I know not when or where there was seen a nation so covering itself with dishonour. If, among, this multitude of sympathetic bystanders, France have any true friend, his advice to France would be, to abandon all that, and never to resume it more. France really ought to know that “refuges of lies” were long ago discovered to lead down only to the Gates of Death Eternal, and to be forbidden to all creatures! – That the one hope for France is to recognise the facts which have come to her, and that they came withal by invitation of her own: how she, – as mass of gilded, proudly varnished anarchy, – has willfully insulted and defied to mortal duel a neighbor not anarchic, but still in a quietly-human, sober and governed state; and has prospered accordingly. Prospered as an array of sanguinary mountebanks versus a Macedonian phalanx must needs do; – and now lies smitten down into hideous wreck and impotence; testifying to gods and men what extent of rotteness, anarchy and hidden vainness lay in her. That the inexorable fact is, she has left herself without resource or power of resisting the victorious Germans; and that her wisdom will be to take that fact into her astonished mind; to know that, howsoever hateful, said fact is inexorable, and will have to be

complied with, – the sooner at the cheaper rate. It is a hard lesson to vainglorious France, but France we hope, has still in it veracity and probity enough to accept fact as an evidently-adamantine entity, which will not brook resistance without penalty, and is unalterable by the very gods.

But indeed the quantity of conscious mendacity that France, official and other, has perpetrated latterly, especially since July last, is something wonderful and fearful. And, alas, perhaps even that is small compared to the self-delusion and “unconscious mendacity” long prevalent among the French; which is of still feller and more poisonous quality, though unrecognised for poison. To me, at times, the mournfulest symptom in France is the figure its “men of genius”, its highest literary speakers, who should be prophets and seers to it, make at present, and indeed for a generation back have been making. It is evidently their belief that new celestial wisdom is radiating out of France upon all the other overshadowed nations; that France is the new Mount Zion of the Universe; and that all this sad, sordid, semi-delirious and, in good part, infernal stuff which French Literature has been preaching to us for the last fifty years, is a veritable new Gospel out of Heaven, pregnant with blessedness for all the sons of men. Alas, one does understand that France made her Great Revolution; uttered her tremendous doom’s voice against a world of human shams should be no more. I often call that a celestial-infernal phenomenon, – the most memorable in our world for a thousand years, on the whole, a transcendent revolt against the devil and his works (since shams are all and sundry of the Devil, and poisonous and unendurable to man). For that we all infinitely love and honour France. And truly all nations are now busy enough copying France in regard to that! From side to side the civilised world there is, in a manner, nothing noticeable but the whole world in deep and dismally-chaotic insurrection against Shams, determination to have done with shames, *coûte que coûte*. Indispensable that battle, however ugly. Well done, we may say



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to all that; for it is the preliminary to everything: – but, alas, all that is not yet victory; it is but half the battle, and the much easier half. The infinitely harder half, which is the equally or still more indispensable, is that of achieving, instead of the abolished shams which were of the Devil, the practicable realities which should be veritable and of God. That first half of the battle, I rejoice to see, is now safe, can now never cease except in victory; but the farther stage of it, I also see, must be under better presidency than that of France, or it will forever prove impossible. The German race, not the Gaelic, are now to be protagonist in that immense world-drama, and from them I expect better issues. Worse we cannot well have. France with a dead-lift effort, now of eighty one years, has accomplished under this head, for herself or for the world, nothing, or even less, – in strict arithmetic, zero with minus quantities. Her prophets prophesy a vain thing; her people rove about in darkness, and have wandered far astray.

Such prophets and such a people; – who, in the way of deception and self-deception, have carried it far! “Given up to strong delusion,” as the Scripture says; till, at last, the lie seems to them the very truth. And now, in their strangling crisis and extreme need, they appear to have no resource but self-deception still, and quasi-heroic gasconade. They do believe it to be heroic. They believe that they are the “Christ of nations”; an innocent godlike people, suffering for the sins of all nations, with an eye to redeem us all; – let us hope that this of the “Christ of Nations” is the non plus ultra of the thing. I wish they would inquire whether there might not be a Cartouche of Nations, fully likely as a Christ of Nations in our time! Cartouche had many gallant qualities; was much admired, and much pitied in his sufferings; and had many fine ladies begging locks of his hair, while the inexorable, indispensable gibbet was preparing. But in the end there was no salvation for Cartouche. Better he should obey the heavy-handed Teutsch police-officer, who has him by the windpipe in such frightful manner; give up part of his stole goods; altogether cease to be a Cartouche, and try to become again a Chevalier Bayard under

improved conditions, and a blessing and beautiful benefit to all his neighbours, – instead of too much the reserve, as now! Clear it is, at any rate, singular as it may seem to France, all Europe does not come to the rescue, in gratitude for the heavenly “illumination” it is getting from France: nor could all Europe, if it did, at this moment prevent that awful Chancellor from having his own way. Metz and the boundary-fence, I reckon, will be dreadfully hard to get out of that Chancellor’s hands again.

A hundred years ago there was in England the liveliest desire, and at one time an actual effort and hope, to recover Alsace and Lorraine from the French. Lord Carteret, called afterwards Lord Granville (no ancestor, in any sense, of his now Honourable synonym), thought by some to be, with the one exception of Lord Chatham, the wisest Foreign Secretary we ever had, and especially the “one Secretary that ever spoke German matters at all”, had set his heart on this very object; and had fair prospects of achieving it, – had not our poor dear Duke of Newcastle suddenly peddled him out of it; and even out of office altogether, into sullen disgust (and too much of wine withal, says Walpole), and into total oblivion by his nation, which, except Chatham, has none such to remember. That Bismarck, and Germany along with him, should now at this propitious juncture make a like demand, is no surprise to me. After such provocation, and after such a victory, the resolution does seem rational, just and even modest. And considering all that has occurred since that memorable cataclysm at Sedan, I could reckon it creditable to the sense and moderation of Count Bismarck that he stands steadily by this; demanding nothing more, resolute to take nothing less, and advancing with a slow calmness towards it by the eligible roads. The “Siege of Paris”, which looks like the hugest and most hideous farce-tragedy ever played under this sun, Bismarck evidently hopes will never need to come to uttermost bombardment, to million-fold death by hunger, or the kindling of Paris and is



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carpentries and asphalt streets by shells and red-hot balls into a sea of fire. Diligent, day by day, seem those Prussians, never resisting nor too much hasting; well knowing the proverb, “Slow fire makes sweet malt”. I believe Bismarck will get his Alsace and what he wants of Lorraine; and likewise that it will do him, and us, and all the world, and even France itself by and by, a great deal of good. Anarchic France gets her first lesson there, – a terribly drastic dose of physic to sick France! – and well will it be for her if she can learn her lesson honestly. If she cannot, she will get another, and even another; and learnt the lesson must be.

Considerable misconception as to Herr von Bismarck is still prevalent in England. The English newspapers, nearly all of them, seem to me to be only getting towards a true knowledge of Bismarck, but not yet got to it. The standing likeness, circulating everywhere ten years ago, of demented Bismarck and his ditto King to Strafford and Charles I versus our Long Parliament (as like as Macedon to Monmouth, and not liker) has now vanished from the earth, no whisper of it ever to be heard more. That pathetic Niobe of Denmark, reft violently of her children (which were stolen children, and were dreadfully ill-nursed by Niobe Denmark), is also nearly gone; and will go altogether so soon as knowledge of the matter is had. Bismarck, as I read him, is not a person of “Napoleonic” ideas, but of ideas quite superior to Napoleonic; shows no invincible “lust of territory,” nor is tormented with “vulgar ambition,” etc.; but has aims very far beyond that sphere; and in fact seems to me to be striving with strong faculty, by patient, grand and successful steps, towards an object beneficial to Germans and to all other men. That noble, patient, deep, pious and solid Germany should be at length welded into a Nation, and become Queen of the Continent, instead of vapouring, vain-glorious, gesticulating, quarrelsome, restless and over-sensitive France, seems to me the hopefulest public fact that has occurred in my time. – I remain, Sir, yours truly.

T. CARLYLE.



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