

La vera patria (The true homeland)

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Decisive Moments in History: Twelve Historical Miniatures¹ | Stefan Zweig

The Conquest of Byzantium

When they prepare for a war, as long as they are not completely equipped, tyrants speak most extensively of peace. Thus, upon his ascent to the throne, Muhammad, too, specifically receives the ambassadors of Emperor Constantine with the most cordial and soothing words. He swears publicly and solemnly by God and his prophet, by the angels and the Koran, that he intends to comply faithfully with the treaties with the basileus. At the same time, however, the underhanded man signs an agreement of mutual neutrality with the Hungarians and the Serbs for three years for those very three years during which he intends to bring the city into his possession without interference. Only then, after Muhammad has sufficiently promised and sworn to uphold the peace, does he provoke war with a violation of the law.

The First Word To Cross The Ocean

This significant year for the world, 1837, when the telegraph makes isolated human experiences simultaneous for the first time, is seldom even noted in our school books, which unfortunately still consider it to be more important to tell about wars and the victories of individual army commanders and nations in stead of about the triumphs of humanity that are real because they are shared. And yet no date in recent history can be compared in its broad psychological implications with that of this change in the value of time. The world has been different since it has been possible to know simultaneously in Paris what is happening at the same moment in Amsterdam, Moscow, Naples, and Lisbon. Only one more step remains to be taken, and then the other continents will be included in that great relationship and a common awareness will be created for all of humanity.

¹ from Stefan Zweig "Decisive Moments in History: Twelve Historical Miniatures", Ariadne Press, Riverside California 1999

The world of Yesterday: memories of a European² | Stefan Zweig

The First Hours Of The War Of 1914

The answer is simple: because the world of 1939 does not possess so much childishly naïve credulity as did that of 1914. Then the people had unqualified confidence in their leaders; no one in Austria would have ventured the thought that the all-high ruler Emperor Franz Josef, in his eighty-third year, would have called his people to war unless from direct necessity, would have demanded such a sacrifice of blood unless evil, sinister, and criminal foes were threatening the peace of the Empire. The Germans, on the other hand, had read the telegrams of their Emperor to the Tsar in which he struggled for peace; a mighty respect for the "authorities," the ministers, the diplomats, and for their discernment and honesty still animated the simple man. If war had come, then it could only have come against the wishes of their own statesmen; they themselves were not at fault, indeed no one in the entire land was at fault. Therefore the criminals, the war mongers must be the other

fellows; we had taken up arms in self-defense against a villainous and crafty enemy, who had “attacked” peaceful Austria and Germany without the slightest provocation. In 1939, however, this almost religious faith in the honesty or at least in the capacity of one’s own government had disappeared throughout Europe. Diplomacy was despised, since one had seen with bitterness how the possibility of a lasting peace had been betrayed at Versailles; nations remembered all too clearly how they had been shamefully cheated of the promises of disarmament and the abolition of secret diplomacy. In truth, there was not a single statesman in 1939 for whom anyone had respect and none in whom one would confidently entrust his destiny. The humblest French crossing-sweeper ridiculed Daladier, and in England, since Munich—“peace in our time”—all confidence in Chamberlain’s perspicacity had vanished; in Italy and in Germany the masses looked upon Mussolini and Hitler with anxiety: Where will he drive us now? To be sure, they had no choice, the Fatherland was at stake: and so the soldiers shouldered their guns, the women let their children go, but not with the unswerving belief of other times that this sacrifice had been unavoidable. They obeyed but without rejoicing. They went to the front, but without the old dream of being a hero; the people, and each individual, already knew that they were naught but the victims either of mundane, political stupidity or of an incomprehensible and malicious force of destiny. Besides, what did the great mass know of war in 1914, after nearly half a century of peace? They did not know war, they had hardly given it a thought. It had become legendary, and distance had made it seem romantic and heroic.

Into The World Again

A panic broke out and the tremor spread through the whole Reich. Abruptly the mark plunged down, never to stop until it had reached the fantastic figures of madness, the millions, the billions and trillions. Now the real witches’ sabbath of inflation started, against which our Austrian inflation with its absurd enough ratio of 15,000 old to 1 of new currency had been shabby child’s play. To describe it in detail, with its incredibilities, would take a whole book and to readers of today it would seem like a fairy tale. I have known days when I had to pay fifty thousand marks for a newspaper in the morning and a hundred thousand in the evening; whoever had foreign currency to exchange did so from hour to hour, because at four o’clock he would get a better rate than at three, and at five o’clock he would get much more than he had got an hour earlier. For instance, I sent a manuscript to my publisher on which I had worked for a year; to be on the safe side I asked for an advance payment of royalties on ten thousand copies. By the time the check was deposited, it hardly paid the postage I had put on the parcel a week before; on street cars one paid in millions, trucks carried the paper money from the Reichsbank to the other banks, and a fortnight later one found hundred thousand mark notes in the gutter; a beggar had thrown them away contemptuously. A pair of shoe laces cost more than a shoe had once cost, no, more than a fashionable store with two thousand pairs of shoes had cost before; to repair a broken window more than the whole house had formerly cost, a book more than the printer’s shop with a hundred presses. For a hundred dollars one could buy rows of six-story houses on Kurfürstendamm, and factories were to be had for the old equivalent of a wheelbarrow.

² from Stefan Zweig “The World of Yesterday. An autobiography”, The Viking Press, New York 1943