



This Modern Age

Review of Hans Kohn, *The Twentieth Century*

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Review of Hans Kohn, *The Twentieth Century: A Mid-Way Account of the Western World* (New York, 1949: Macmillan; London, 1950: Gollancz), *Jewish Chronicle*, 10 August 1951, 10



IT IS A STRANGE phenomenon that, living as we do in a time of acute and continual moral and political crisis, when change seems no longer gradual but abrupt and catastrophic, comparatively so little has been done to investigate the historical roots of the ideas which are today so violently upsetting the established order.

M. Vermeil and Mr Rohan Butler, in their valuable books, have told us a good deal about the roots of national socialism: the late M. Berdyaev has cast a somewhat fitful, though occasionally

brilliant, light upon the origins of Communism, flavoured with his own brand of mystical Marxism; and a good deal of scholarship has gone into the self-examination of France by her most penetrating and self-critical minds during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a harvest later generously reaped by such critics as Professor D. W. Brogan in his magnificent diagnosis, at once detailed and sweeping, of French history and French thought, and by the Marquis Henri de Jouvenel in his exceptionally intelligent and stimulating essays. Yet, on the whole, the inhabitants of Europe show an odd lack of curiosity about the causes of their vicissitudes.

It is, therefore, particularly pleasant to record that Professor Hans Kohn is among the small but distinguished company of scholars who are today engaged in this most valuable activity. This task requires a combination of gifts not often found together: accurate historical scholarship; a gift for the sharp generalisation which does not transcend the factual evidence; a vivid and imaginative insight which discerns the present in the past, and does not merely discover it there because it has itself smuggled it in secretly and sometimes unconsciously, before triumphantly uncovering its presence; a gift for lucid exposition; and above all a sense of the difference between the essential and the peripheral, a faculty which neither industry nor historical imagination can provide. All these gifts Professor Kohn possesses in a rich measure, as his previous works have shown.

The subtitle of this work is 'A Mid-Way Account of the Western World', and, as the author says, it is 'an attempt to draw up, within a brief compass, a balance sheet of the last fifty years'. It is divided into four sections, of which the first is entitled 'Disintegrating Forces in Nineteenth-Century Civilisation'. This includes essays on the rise of nationalism, and the tendencies which Professor Kohn entitles 'the dethronement of reason' and 'the cult of force'; and they have behind them his unique knowledge of Romanticism and reaction in Germany. No contemporary scholar has written more accurately or interestingly about the rise of German chauvinism in

the early years of the nineteenth century, and its philosophical, literary, social and political roots, and this makes Professor Kohn uniquely qualified to treat this topic in his second section, 'The Challenge of Tradition'. Here he is compelled to treat Russian soil, and once again Professor Kohn displays what is almost unique among Western historians of culture – a first-hand knowledge of the antecedents of the Russian Revolution in the nineteenth century – in particular of the radical intellectuals such as Bakunin, Herzen and Belinsky, from whose works many telling quotations are provided.

In his third section, 'The Challenge of Old Methods and New Trends', Professor Kohn examines the great scourges of our own times. Origins are scrupulously examined, fallacies exploded, parallels indicated. To each of them – imperialism, racialism, Fascism, National Socialism, and Communism – in his just and inexorable way, he metes out its due measure of analysis and refutation.

In his last section, entitled 'Forces of Re-integration and Reformation', Professor Kohn considers the prospects of liberal democracy, and the possibilities of cooperation between those who believe in and practise it. He concludes with cautiously optimistic conclusions, to which the historical evidence of the rest of the book offers support far more convincing than the warnings and exhortations and sermons of those earnest, but often ignorant and emotionally unbalanced, writers, in the grip of some fixed idea or in fanatical flight from it, who promote campaigns for this or that cause, filled, as they usually are, with unfounded optimism or equally baseless fears, chaos and bewilderment. They would profit greatly from the dry light, solid learning, and sober, civilised voice of Professor Hans Kohn.