Italian Thought and the War

Guido de Ruggiero[1]

Writing for a French audience in 1916, de Ruggiero here reviews the major intellectual currents that culminated in Italy's entry to the First World War in May 1915. Though events cannot be properly understood while they are still in motion, argues de Ruggiero, the dispute over the war revealed certain profound truths implicit in these competing ideologies and schools of thought. Democratic, Catholic, socialist, nationalist and liberal arguments for and against the war gave way to a new scene, and a new set of problems, once the decision was made and war arrived. De Ruggiero goes on to discuss the political, philosophical and cultural implications of the war, again stressing—in line with his early historicism—that these would become fully apparent only with the benefit of hindsight.

1.

Are we currently fighting several wars, or just one?[2] Monsieur Briand,[3] in his recent lecture in Rome, neatly expressed the unitary conception of the present war as follows: there is one front with several sectors. His words met with broad agreement from us Italians, either because they reflected our ongoing experience of the long months of war, which we had been following with the same lively interest which is now focused with equal intensity on Poland, the Marne and the Isonzo; or else because they dispelled the accusation that Italy's

[1] [Translated from 'Le pensée italienne et la guerre', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (1916), pp. 749–85; and 'Il pensiero italiano e la guerra', *Scritti politici 1912–1926*, ed. Renzo De Felice (Rocca San Casciano, Cappelli, 1963), pp. 125–165. Square brackets around footnote text indicate editorial interventions.]

[2] [Note from French version:] When he proposed to write this article for the *Revue*, Monsieur de Ruggiero judged that it might be interesting to the French public to know something about the perspective of Italian thought on the war. In giving him this opportunity we were happy to affirm the bonds that tie us [in France] more firmly than ever to the philosophers of Italy.

[Note from Italian version:] This article incorporates material from, among other things, three of de Ruggiero's earlier articles: 'Come la guerra travolge i partiti. I. La democrazia', *L'Idea Nazionale* (20 December 1914); 'Le idealità della Guerra. Negazioni', and 'Le idealità della Guerra. Affermazioni', *Il Resto di Carlino* (23 and 29 December 1914). It was reviewed by B. Croce in *La Critica*, vol. 15 (20 March 1917), pp. 130–132.

[3] [Translator's note: Aristide Briand (1862–1932) was Prime Minister of France five times and throughout 1916, the year the French version of this article was published.]

involvement in the war is purely adventitious and particular, taking place away from the centre of the great Allied war effort.

It soon becomes plain that our involvement is far from adventitious, so long as it is viewed not as something that is going on far away at the periphery of the conflict, but as it appears to those in the middle of the action at the moment it is being performed. This accusation originates from the error, widely noted among philosophers, of wanting to affirm unity at the expense of difference, or in this case the identity of the front at the expense of the diversity of sectors, while the real fact of the matter cannot be anything but a synthesis of the two. When a sector is understood as an entire race of people – as in the present war, where the armies are the nations themselves in arms – and every race brings to the conflict its own irreducible personality and demands determined by its history, I do not believe that it harms the unity of the war effort, which symbolizes the idea of the united front, to stress the differences between the sectors. The confusion cannot result in agreement, but might result in a well-defined consciousness of the particular tasks at hand, provided that this is contained in the higher consciousness of a united effort and an immanent purpose. This latter consciousness, without the former, is empty, like the Kantian category separated from sensible particulars. It may likewise be said that consciousness of particulars is blind if these are not bound by a higher unity of purpose.

Leaving to governments the task of disciplining the various sectors of the bloody clash of arms, the thinkers of the Allied nations can lay claim to the more modest but no less useful task of fostering understanding between the various intellectual and ideological sectors in which the ever more disorderly struggle of ideas goes on. There can be no fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas without the knowledge of a profound spiritual unity which, once attained, confirms the original and lively variety of mental attitudes without either

neutralizing the diversity of the various races' mental physiognomies or denying them the life and autonomy that they have secured over the course of their histories.

It seems to me that historical thought today is split between two directly opposed abstractions. On the one hand, there is a misconceived national egoism which would leave races dangerously isolated; and on the other, there is a misconceived internationalism, which results in confusion and deprives the races of the character of spiritual life. These abstractions are equally anti-historical: the egoism that denies what one finds of one race in another; and the false internationalism that reduces them to atoms and ignores all the indelible impressions that history has left on each one. In effect, as is plain to see, both misconceptions imply weakness and disintegration, denying or underestimating the power of individual initiative and in every particular case misrepresenting the sense and the intention that drives actions.

The two opposing abstractions are easily amended and synthesized, albeit without great profit. History has no place for a synthesis which occurs in thought but not also *in re*. This is precisely the hard and laborious task which today is being imposed on the consciousness of races. It will not be completed without the resolution of the concrete and determined problems which time and again beset human activities in various domains: military, political, economic, social, moral and so forth. This realistic demand is not extraneous to thought, but is rather what constitutes its soul and its power. Hence the claim just mentioned would be just as true if we were to reverse it: there is no synthesis *in re* that is not at the same time a synthesis in thought. The reciprocity of these claims reveals the profound need for historical consciousness, which, though Aristotle and Plotinus caught glimpses of it in their attempts to conceive of αληθές (*alethes*; a truth) that was at the same

time τοῦτο τὸ πρᾶγμα (*touto to pragma*; actual practice), was to undergo greater development later, in modern philosophy.[4]

The task of the present time seems to be to create this consciousness outside the abstract and fragmentary particularism of the philosophical schools and thus to grant philosophy itself an intimate understanding of the contingent problems of life.

This is not a matter of treating thought and facts as though they were extraneous forces, vainly giving thought priority over facts in the sterile search for ideals amid the reality of historical events, or else of giving facts priority over thought and thus frustrating the work of the spirit, as in Marxist ideology. On the contrary, it is a matter of conceiving of thought as fact and fact as thought: the comprehension of life can – and must – be valued as part of life, not as a mirror on or image of life.

Philosophers of every era, keeping their gaze fixed on eternal things, have always disregarded the contingent problems of empirical life. This contemptuous and narrow outlook corresponded to a now-outmoded phase of historical thought in which eternity and contingency were conceived in inert opposition to one another. But since modern thought seized upon the idea that the eternal is contingency in action, its inner, living spirit, philosophers have been drawn irresistibly back toward life and its absolute empiricism. They have no fear of corrupting the purity of thought with the impurity of life in its immediacy, for without the contamination of the flesh, the Logos of Hellenic-Judaic speculation would never have become the spirit of Christian consciousness.

Lately in Italy it has been noted with regret that many of the great minds have fallen silent or speak in hushed tones. It is plain to see in theory, or even better in formulae, that philosophy is consciousness of the real, which is to say history, and that history is the eternal realization of the spirit, which is to say philosophy. In practice, however, the philosophers

[4] [Translator's note: de Ruggiero presents these ancient Greek terms in the original, without translation or commentary.]

follow the example of the unfortunate Hegelian owl, which spreads its wings at dusk, and wait for events to play out entirely so they can later revive them in their doctrines. And historians similarly wait until they are in full possession of *res gesta* of today before they set about the *historia rerum* of tomorrow, without recognizing that – according to the acute observation of a young Italian philosopher – this *res gesta* is already itself a *historia rerum* and, above all, a *historia rerum* of today would have the inestimable value of a *res gesta*. Thought is not just the contemplation of reality, but reality historically determined and historically active.

Convinced of the immanent and actual value of philosophical and historical thought, I now feel emboldened to address the French public and to acquaint it with some of the more notable aspects of the Italian mentality with respect to today's problems. I would be satisfied if my efforts might serve as grounds for deeper and further-reaching discussions by others in the future. I propose not to inquire into the causes of events, but only to review the main schools of thought. This is because I am convinced that it is wholly futile for historians to seek the causes of events that are still in motion. There is really a sort of reciprocal creation of causes with effects and for effects. However, among the forms and manifestations of a mental state which I will investigate, a prominent place is set aside for the search for causes. Naturally, this search must have its own value and its own efficacy. Such value and efficacy belong not to the abstract knowledge which these researches aim to bring into being, but to the actions that derive from these and of which they are the active and dynamic centre. Here, then, we see why one can and must assign importance to those considerations and those theories that, viewed from a rigorously historical standpoint, may be considered outmoded or inadequate: they owe their value not to what they are, but to what they do. The action that results from them has, in effect, universal import: once accomplished and detached from its

originators, it becomes part of a common heritage, the shared status of which was not evident in the motives or causes from which it sprang.

In action, then, there is a special force which causes the various forces in play to adapt and unite. In the opinions and beliefs of a given era there is always something more profound than what could ever be dredged up through a purely intellectualistic examination. This body of ideas does not prescribe actions, but is itself action in the form of thought. It is, I should say, the spirit's consciousness of what it is doing.

In the following exposition, I begin with the most elementary forms of thought – the thought of the masses – and work my way up to the most complex and historically evolved. However, I will not be concerned with fine distinctions, but with empirical groupings, which will allow me to beat a clear path through the discussion. I will seek to show that, despite the errors and shortcomings of old and immature ways of thinking, in all these ideas there are certain profound elements of truth which have roots in the unified historical consciousness of the age. We need to rejuvenate and transform these ideologies, giving each one a realistic stamp and accent.

2. The Political Party Mentality

It is interesting to examine the two-way process of action and reaction between the parties. On one hand the war surpasses the parties, upsets the principles of their programmes and disrupts their readymade plans, creating new agreements and disagreements and endless strange alliances, divisions and schisms. On the other hand, the parties react to the war by trying to fit and twist it to their ideals, exploiting its immense historical importance for their own ends. All this is quite natural: the ideals of a party are formed historically, being the product of a whole collection of experiences, which are erected into systems through which new experiences can be understood on rigid, predetermined lines. In this way the past

provides direction for the future. Accordingly the ideals of a party are always in some respects inadequate to make sense of new events and their unforeseeable complications; but, to the extent that they constitute not a rigid and inflexible abstract scheme, but rather an active mentality, which has the capacity to resolve the rich variety of facts before it according to the peculiarities of its own attitudes, it turns out that even the most ordinary of new events can be somehow regimented and disciplined by the mentality of the party and thus given a certain finalistic orientation.

But when the new event is, like today, a huge war, the deeper ideals of which have yet to become clear, the inadequacies of parties' mentalities are revealed as hesitation, uncertainty and often great errors. The present demands originality and absolute novelty from those who pretend to look upon it from the point of view of the past.

If we now set out to examine the differences between the attitudes of the parties in Italy, it is natural that we should take our cues from the Democratic Party (with its variations ranging from constitutionalism to radicalism), precisely because it was the first to find its own way in the attempt to fit the war into its clearly defined ideals. Born out of the conflict of the *Risorgimento,* in which it constantly laid claim to all the ideals, the Democratic Party believed that it could once again try to determine the spiritual direction of the conflict. However, it soon had to take notice of the strictly episodic value of national claims – the last refuge of the old irredentist cliques – and the way the principles and ideals of the *Risorgimento* gave way to the new principles of the great hegemonic powers, slowly prepared and matured during the long years of peace. But this concept of hegemony does not fall within the narrow scope of the democratic mentality, which tends toward levelling and egalitarianism; and which looks, in the historic movements of nations, not at their needs at a given stage of their development, nor at the pressures that lead them to expand, but rather at the need for all to conform to an abstract equilibrium, defined by none of them in particular,

which forms the true and proper ideal of democratic thought. And it is for this reason that from the beginning, the Democratic Party has declaimed the hegemony of ‘Prussian militarism’.

This ‘Prussian militarism’ is a grand phrase coined by Italian and French democrats to describe an imaginary entity custom-made to receive the most damning democratic criticism. Democrats support the battle against German militarism, but not against the German spirit, industry, science or culture; they want to ruin the one and leave the others intact. And they do not see that militarism and the German spirit are one and the same thing, a single mental physiognomy and not two separate entities. With their tendency to treat every mind and consciousness alike, be it of a person or of a race, democrats do not pay attention to what is most peculiar and distinctly individual in the development of a race, each of which has tendencies and a physiognomy all of its own. They believe they can eliminate one moment of it, one aspect, as though it were mechanically juxtaposed to all the rest. They do not understand that what is called Prussian militarism is not the material fact of possessing many cannons and rifles, but the tone, the very spirit of the German mentality, which is explicated in the organization of industry, schools and science as much as of armies.

Democrats have fashioned a wholly artificial entity called ‘man’, or an entity called ‘the people’, which it believes it can realize by applying the right means. One such means would be war. In the present war, therefore, it sees a providential means that favours the advent, in our century, of the ideals it has been yearning for. Once Prussian militarism is defeated and sound democratic principles are everywhere affirmed, thanks to the armies of the Allies, an idyllic era of peace and prosperity would ensue; no more ruinous arms races, no more enmities between peoples, no more state frontiers bristling with cannons, but instead peaceful relations of interests and sentiments, equal prosperity for all, equal participation of all in the riches that democracy gives us. And all this through the means and method of war,

this war that magnifies hatreds, sparks ineradicable grudges, prompts calls for vengeance that may ring through the centuries, exacerbates the differences between races, and pushes each to convulse with individuality. No more infantile conception can be imagined. The democrats want a war to end all wars, accept the greatest of hatreds to put an end to hatred, and take a leap into empty space to escape the vertigo that comes from peering into the void.

But the abstract universalism of democratic principles is shown to be especially ruinous when applied to problems of the structure of the state and the determination of relationships between states. It has impoverished the power of the state, both internally, by dispersing among the masses what could not be realized except in the unity of a higher, organic consciousness, and externally, by subordinating the personality of the state in international relations to the transcendent and abstract demands of its empty humanitarianism. There is a risk that the Italian-French alliance will get lost amid the snows of a vague idealism if, absent the menace of a common threat, we do not seek to found it on some basis more solid than the facile doctrinaire apriorism of democracy, which would subordinate this alliance to the extraneous requirements of a supposedly international democracy.

The lofty system of alliances conceived *a priori*, transcending the ends of the people who make them, is indubitably a new illustration of the simplifying tendency of the democratic mentality, which abstracts from concrete and determinate historical situations and conceives of them in terms of ends attained long ago. The great enemy of democracy, then, is history; it cannot conceive of history as anything but the retrospective and rhetorical amplification of events already completed. So conceived, history has nothing to tell us about the concrete situations with which it is presented, and which call for decisions corresponding to the gravity of the historical moment.

This anti-historicism derives from the insufficient subjectivity of democratic principles: they are nothing but the perceptions of identities and not of differences, of abstract universals and not of particulars. So they cannot be founded on a determined historical current, but always stand outside and in front of history as archetypes and examples. The ideas of equality, rank, norms in which they are contained are testament to precisely this poor articulation, this weak sense of difference and of history. So, presented with this supreme difference that is war, democracy cannot do anything but yearn for a nebulous identity, deprived of any content or value. Today, therefore, while the war is being fought, democrats fall far short of the demands of the historical moment; but tomorrow, when the war is over, they will be the first to sing the paean of victory.

Compared with the resolute humanity of democracy, the Italian Catholic mentality is revealed to be far more timid and full of those reservations and misunderstandings that, in every epoch, have been among its characteristic aspects. At first, before our [Italy's] entry into the war, the Catholics declared themselves in favour of neutrality, which, under the veil of patriotism, betrayed their sympathies for the Central Powers, inspired in every case by the political directives of the Holy See. From the moment when the Pope addressed his message of peace to the people – a cold and heartless message, driven by an interest in resolving the Roman political problem by means of the misfortune of others – the Catholics declared themselves opposed to the war as contrary to the fraternal unity of religious consciousness.

This attitude reveals a strange anomaly. Might it be said that the Catholics and the Pope are one and the same, and they, like him, have an international and supranational end to realize? It would not be possible to form a party on purely Catholic and universalistic ideals, since a party needs, in order to affirm itself as such, some historically differentiated and individualized content. To this objection the Catholic Party has replied with a subtle scholastic argument, distinguishing between the absolute neutrality ordered by the Holy See,

and a kind of neutrality conditioned and limited by the party, subject to revision and even radical negation if the supreme interests of the state should call for it.

This distinction, though subtle, does not do away with the equivocation of attitude, especially when the equivocation is intrinsic to the very ideology of the Italian Catholic Party – a phrase in which the adjective 'Italian' contradicts the noun 'Catholic'.[5] The Catholic principle does not represent a universal conceived as a moment of the spirit, as a category apt to be founded on some particular and differentiated content, but a universal already fixed and rigid, like an historical institution permeated with transcendence and, owing to its very lack of articulation, hostile to the differentiation of all the particular organizations that make up the state. One cannot treat [the Catholic Party spirit as] a pure form, only as a form and a content grafted onto the trunk of this Roman universal, in which a misconceived patriotism leads Catholics to persist uselessly in wanting to find an ideal antecedent to our Italian identity.

In relation to the Roman tradition, Catholicism could never be narrowly Italian. After the rapid decline of the idea of a pure religion of the spirit, the Church has had to adopt a more secular stance, to treat its celestial ideal as one force among others which steer the course of humanity, and to convert the pure, spiritual values of their first conquests into realistic, political values. The internationalism of today's Catholic Church, then, does not have the status of a principle over and above the conflicts and competitions between the nations of the earth. Instead it is a purely political and historical principle, reduced to the same level as those very competitions and conflicts. This internationalism is usually affirmed at the expense of any unity between those party to the conflict. The politics of the Holy See is decidedly anti-Italian.

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[5] [Translator's note: de Ruggiero does not specify which adjective and noun he has in mind, but the answer becomes clear over the next few paragraphs. I have added 'Italian' and 'Catholic' to the text for the sake of clarity. Square brackets have been omitted so as not to obstruct the reader.]

The last century of Italian history is living testament to the irreducible contradiction between the noun ‘Catholic’ and the adjective ‘Italian’. After the painful attempt to adapt the one to the other failed with the Catholic revolution of 1848, the terms have followed different paths. An Italian Catholic party could later emerge once the opposition between the ideal premises had been wilfully forgotten, resulting in difficult compromise and reservation, which makes possible a political atmosphere that persists from day to day and which cannot give the present moment in history the attention it deserves.

It is good that the French reflect on this profound antinomy of Italian national life, which may have grave political repercussions. For us the problem is very different from what we find in France, where Catholicism might once again become a national force, not insofar as it is Roman Catholicism, but insofar as it is essentially the Gallican Church, an institution that throughout its history was driven by a spirit of resistance and hostility to the demands of Rome and was as such part of the historical development of the French people. The reason Italian Catholics have not felt the full gravity of the choice the war puts before them is that they are Catholics, which is to say that they depend on an authority which is affirmed equally as spirit and as flesh, and which, as flesh, participates in the carnal character of the worldly struggle for existence. Another reason is that they are also Italians, which is to say that they belong to a state that affirms the autonomy of its own initiative, on which the whole weight of its history is gathered. The Catholics felt more firmly that they were simply Italians, and that they had done their duty as such. In this way, without noticing it, they renounced their reason for being a political party if – and this is beyond doubt – this reason had nothing to do with feelings of religion and piety. And in this regard, in fact, we may rightly suppose that they have not changed in the slightest.

A more active attitude was taken by the so-called extreme parties, the nationalists on the right and the socialists on the left.

The latent dualism implicit in socialism is polarized in a stark opposition. Having arisen as a straightforwardly proletarian, anti-bourgeois movement, over the course of its development socialism has been gradually infiltrated by bourgeois and democratic influences, which have corrupted its original purity. Having shown itself incapable of realizing the autonomous spiritual life and the superior ethic of the 'sublime' to which the purest syndicalist ideology aspires, the proletariat sought to establish a new form of civilization on the ruins of the old bourgeoisie – the larger the proletariat became, the more closely it modelled itself on the bourgeoisie, led by a strong sense of the latter's spiritual superiority. At the same time, proletarian ideology was refashioned on the model of democratic ideology, that is, without resistance and without struggle, thereby revealing, to its cost, the character of superficial and ephemeral stratification it had pressed, for a very different purpose, on Marxism.

A late awareness has redirected one part of Italian socialism to the revolutionary premises of the syndicalist programme. It has created a deep rupture in the Party, and the war has widened this to the point of open conflict. Democratic socialists wanted the war; but, to justify their claim to autonomy with respect to the democratic mentality, they flew the old flag of 'the economy', cynically claiming to want to use the war to hasten the dissolution of capitalist society and to bring forward the advent of the proletarian economic order. The official Socialist Party, by contrast, voiced a far more coherent opposition to the war, having seen within it a revolutionary force that would forestall and disrupt its own plans, weakening a key foundational 'myth', namely class war. Nevertheless, it hopes that in the future, once the economic repercussions of the war have been felt, it will be able to make a fresh case for class politics. Having nothing to say about the great historical problems of the present day, the new proletarian consciousness having been reduced to nothing but the broken skeleton of an economic conception, which devalues any spiritual life it might have possessed, the

Socialist Party plays the role of a mournful crow that settles on a desolate battlefield. And yet some believe that the spirit which has dominated and transfigured the economy during wartime will also outlive the war and confront the formidable problems of peacetime with the same intrepidity that has carried it this far.

The Nationalists, the most recent entrants in the competition between parties, have thrown together a tradition that they never really had, giving their actions some semblance of prestige by means of a few crumbs of political thought drawn from like-minded folk on the other side of the Alps. From French nationalism they have taken certain anti-democratic ideas and some clerical sympathies; from German nationalism, an imperialist tendency and the political realism that serves as a necessary means to it. But, having transplanted these discordant elements into Italian historical life, without taking the time first to adapt them to their new context, the Nationalists have concocted some strange mixtures and combinations of ideas, as well as some attitudes that are stranger still. It just so happened, for example, that the Nationalists sided at first with the Germans; but later, drawing on popular anti-Austrian sentiment, they declared themselves in favour of an irredentist war, setting aside their second-hand political realism, which had until then inspired their Triplicist politics.[6] This resulted, in a way no one had predicted, in them having to break with the clerics and unify with the Democrats, with whom they shared, first, the taste for inciting public sentiment and, second, the ability to engage with the people. But on the other hand, since they did not want to renounce their imperialist tendencies, which were firmly at odds with democratic principles, they found no broad agreement with their allies and thus wore out the multi-coloured coat of their ideas through a continuous process of patching.

[6] [Translator's note: the phrase 'Triplicist politics' (*politica triplicista*) refers to the 'Triple Alliance' of 1882–1915 through which Italy, Germany and Austria-Hungary were each committed to support the others in the event that any of them were invaded.]

What the Nationalists neither knew how to do nor wanted to do, from the beginning, even when the idea was put to them, was to graft their ideology onto the old trunk of the Italian right, the only part that could boast a straightforwardly national tradition, rejuvenating it with a fresher, more lively consciousness and replacing its abstract doctrinairism with moderate realist exigencies.

The Liberal Party, too, which holds the great majority of the political powers of the nation, draws its power from the principles of the old right. Many have noted the decadence, typical of the old guard, who no longer know how to adapt their old ideas to the new situation, and live instead in the past, having somehow lost their sense of what is dynamic in the principle of conservation. Nevertheless, this party has held firm, even when its power and efficacy have been diminished, to the political positions of the right, which have gone on jealously defending the prerogatives of the state, providing a synthesis of constitution and institutions, liberty and order, in ecclesiastical legislation of a most rigid kind, in an unwavering preoccupation with an energetic internal politics which arises in any state that is formed amid innumerable dangers and difficulties. But its political, social and economic concessions were always made too late, under pressure from the masses, on which it relied for its monopoly. Its foreign policy was weak and fragmentary; this is fatal for a state without clear borders, already constrained by difficult debates raging within, in an epoch where other states, having already attained internal equilibrium, set about a vigorous programme of world politics.

This was the strength and the inevitable weakness of the great Italian Liberal Party, even when confronted with the present war. From the beginning it clearly saw the problem of the internal security of the state, which is to say, the problem of securing its borders; but after this, it ended up caught between the formidable difficulties of the still larger problems of foreign politics and of how to resolve it in the absence of any single standard or a well-

defined historical reference point. Salandra's[7] famous formula, 'sacred egoism', reveals at once the strength, the inadequacy and, in a word, the pettiness of that attitude in times like these, when it is true that the particular needs of different nations do and must influence the international problem, but it is also true that this problem calls for strong reactions from them, and has the strength of a concrete and autonomous factor in the determination of their future destiny. At the very moment I am writing, the great crisis of liberal consciousness, personified by our government, is coming to a head. How this problem is solved will determine not only the future attitudes of the party, but perhaps also the very fate of Italy.

The various parties, with their different ideas about how to explain and justify the war, are nonetheless united in the practical and concrete will of the war itself, and in their awareness of the necessities that derive from it. And it is this union that makes each and every one of them a national party, part of the whole and never to be divided from it. The lively sense of fraternal collaboration which animates the various political groups is perhaps the best thing to have come out of the war. This must not be forgotten in the future, for the war ethic must outlive the war if we want to create a real and lasting peace. Tomorrow the differences between the parties will re-emerge, greater than before, each one, strange though it seems, reinvigorated by the war, having grown more in intensity and profundity than in extension; and none will be able to draw from a universal historical fact any advantage on which it has an exclusive monopoly. But, corresponding to this, responsibility for the war will weigh equally on everyone, as much on those who wanted it as on those who did not, who will be united in a common task.

The unity of action provides the parties with a unity of historical consciousness which they have hitherto lacked, and which has made them look like products of different historical

[7] [Translator's note: Antonio Salandra, 1853–1931, was President of the Council of Ministers of the Kingdom of Italy (*Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri del Regno d'Italia*) from 21 March 1914 until 18 June 1916. During this time he pressed for the Italians to enter the war, which they did in 1915.]

eras, united by extrinsic and artificial ties. Today, by contrast, the sense of unity is shared by everyone and has already found its first immediate expression in a common discipline, felt all the more strongly as people have become conscious of its importance as a means to ensure that the strength of the whole nation is expressed in the actions of its government. Given that the parties have so much lively energy, the historical ideologies from which they draw their names seem ever more feeble and ill-suited to the world in which we find ourselves. These ideologies are very far from absorbing all the thought of the war, to which they have given only the poorest expression, limited as they are by historical contingencies that hinder its free development.

In this war there are other currents of ideas that are not tied to any readymade politics of the present day and which yet form the nucleus of public opinion. These are independent of the parties and have different meanings, which are sometimes interwoven with ends, and which sometimes rise above them into a vaster and more human comprehension of actual problems. It would be useful for us to resolve these inchoate philosophies into a concrete vision of philosophy.

3. Transcendent and Immanent Ideals

Does the war have any ideals at its core? Can we find running through it some living thought, which each of the adversaries wants to assert beyond the confines of its own territory, as though led into the world by Providence? These questions have lately been troubling Italian scholars. In truth, there would be no wars without concrete ideals and without deep, spiritual causes, which generate firm convictions and persuasions in races, as well as in single individuals, and can form the spiritual energies of the armies and nations that sustain them.

More recent history has shown us that the greatest wars fought in the nineteenth century drew their ideals from the great nationalist principles, which were developed as a

counterblast to the ideas of Jacobin humanitarianism. Great battles were fought over these issues by the bourgeoisie, which found in the ideal of nationality an expression of its interests better than any that eternal principles could provide.

Had we wanted to evaluate the war that is going on today in the same way as that period, we would have found ourselves rather embarrassed. It is true that even today people talk about wars between nations, but the formation of national unities has no more than an episodic character. The major players have no great national claim to give them value, and they do nothing but fan this spiritual flame in order to give to their own action greater moral and historic significance.

More often noticed instead, at least on the surface of the conflict, are economic interests. Already everyone has affirmed that we are fighting to win new markets and commercial hegemony. A celebrated thinker of our country, on seeing the scientific and historical value of the various views of the economic foundation of the war, told me that this seemed to him 'the war of historical materialism'.[8]

This is a judicious, thought-provoking observation. The spiritual content of the European races undoubtedly is, or at least was, rather meagre. None of the great moral powers of humanity seems to have come forward to preside over the cause of arms and to raise the tone of the conflict. The old religion, on which many ideal powers have called in its millenarian history, has vanished from people's hearts, and there is no new religion, or at least no new spirit to imbue the old one, to substitute or vivify it. Thus the rich inheritance of moral ideas is devalued, and one everywhere finds that nothing remains of the great spiritual principles of life but a thin veneer of interests.

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[8] [Translator's note: This phrase appears in, and has been extensively quoted from, B. Croce, *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915*, first edition (Bari, Laterza, 1928), p. 345. However, since de Ruggiero wrote 'Italian Thought and the War' in 1914–1916, it would be misleading to describe this as a *quotation* from Croce. While Croce may well be the source, de Ruggiero refers to an earlier conversation in which he expressed the same thought.]

Ideal ends are degraded to the role of means and vehicles for something lesser than them in dignity and value. It is true that this confirms their ideal primacy, since imitation is an indication of the high regard in which they are held, even by those who make poor copies of them. But on the other hand, it is also an indication of the moral baseness of the times. And, however more or less well-founded the materialist interpretations of different nations' attitudes might be, the sole fact that they are so widely believed by the public must lead us to grant them a central place among the ideal principles of the war.

In any case, even overlooking the materialists' scepticism about consciousness, we affirm two great ideal currents, each conceived as antithetical to the other. The first, born in a period prior to our entry into the war, is today greatly weakened, if it has not disappeared altogether. This is the German conception of the war. The Germans wanted to draw out of the very structure of the opposing organisms a claim in favour of the German alliance, which would have the advantage of greater spiritual cohesion than its opponents had. It was said, in fact, that the dominant note of this alliance was struck by a single nation, with a single history and a single aspiration which had been formed over its course. But still more notable has been the German mentality, which contains the seed of any possibility of expansion and dominion.

It is in the nature of Germans to give to each act the value of finality as it is completed, all the greater the moment it is realized in history, the value of a moment in the realization of the universe. From this is derived their tendency to set themselves a civilizing mission.

At the beginning of the last century, Fichte spoke of the Germans, in his celebrated *Addresses to the German Nation*, as a people of the elect; Hegel, meanwhile, offered a metaphysical deduction of the primacy of Germany, which he placed at the centre of the universe.

Not only a century of fortunate developments but also, more importantly, of hard graft, have enabled the Germans to transform the idea of their nation from the primitive and ingenuous apocalyptic vision of the Romantics into a true and real messianic aspiration. The great German thought of the classical era has thus moulded the ‘Germanic Idea’, and when that thought was weakened, the Idea nonetheless survived, incarnate in the German nation, with its vigorous industry and restless activity, which have carried it far and contributed, via its expansionist tendency, to the realization of the universal mission of that Idea.

This tendency of the German mentality is affirmed today in Italy to the point of exaggeration. One speaks of the duty of higher civilizations to impose themselves on lower civilizations: wherever there is spirit, culture, and discipline, German organization presents itself as the means, at once providential and necessary, to the life and the well-being of the people.

Many of our scholars, being hopelessly partisan, looked favourably on the concept of the German Idea and the country’s expansionist movement. For a long time they have passively accepted the supremacy of the Idea. It is easy to be convinced, when one’s mind is clear of doctrinaire preconceptions, that German thought has already delivered all that it could, and that it has done all that it can: the task of civilizing and enlightening that it has set itself today is already a fact, historically finished and has as such passed, so to speak, into history.

The expansion of the German Idea, which is much discussed today, is nothing but a dogmatic concept, an historic recollection, meant to fill the spiritual void that the Germans feel in their hearts. Each nation has already taken from the German mentality what was necessary to attain its own spiritual needs and, having received a healthy boost, has set out on the path to its individual development, distancing itself from the original source to the extent and in the direction that the originality of its spirit allowed. So deeply felt was the need for

renewal that the assimilation of German thought occurred spontaneously, free of any imposition. Today, though, the same dual form with which the Germans pretend to impose that civilization and culture shows how far from spontaneous and essential the feeling of a need for it is, and how infantile the claim to want total Germanization, when the history of a century has seen the lives of the various nations develop along such divergent lines. German Romantic thought has imposed itself through its intrinsic force and originality. Today, by contrast, the Germans want to impose their culture by extrinsic means. This reveals its false and mechanical nature.[9]

Opposed to this current of transcendent ideals is another, which was prompted and inspired by the character that the Triple Entente was intended to impress upon the war. In this current there is no sign of a unique spiritual personality, since no nation can claim to direct the entire war by itself; but for the same reason, each declares that it is fighting for the liberty of Europe against the pretensions of an oppressive hegemony. It is a war of liberty and autonomy, then, so far as the combatants want to save and preserve that for which each race has had to fight over the course of its historical life; but at the same time, it is a war of justice and of right, concerning the small, defenceless states' right to existence, keeping the world out of the clutches of a power that recognizes no limits. Liberty, autonomy, right and justice form the common thread which today's thinkers have done so much to sustain. Within the more limited sphere of the war conducted by France and Italy, the idea of the unity of Latin civilization, moreover, with its various mental hues, has played an important part. This idea comes from the physical unity of the race and from spiritual affinities: both groups are conceived in antithesis to the individuality so marked in Germany.

In spite of the transcendent abstraction characteristic of today's ideals, the hard experiences of war have revealed the vanity of claims to rights without the power to make

[9] [Translator's note: the passage running 'German Romantic thought… mechanical nature' is absent from the Italian version of the text. It constitutes a single sentence in the French text.]

them count; of justice without anyone to enforce it; and of a civilization that does not know how to answer the claims of barbarism. They have further demonstrated that the autonomy of the people cannot be a privilege bestowed by nature and geographical arrangements, and that liberty is not an intangible part of our heritage, but a hard-won thing that must be attained continually and will not last if it is not re-won day by day. This whole mass of general ideas, without precise historical individuation or any solid foundation in reality, is somewhat discredited in Italy today, at least in the transcendent and abstract form in which they were previously conceived. They are a residue of the old spirit of abstraction left over from the eighteenth century, though stripped of that enthusiastic and very human feeling of innovation which had made them persuasive.

But abstraction is not falsity and transcendence in the domain of human values is not invincible. The war itself, which has shown the worthlessness of so many of the general ideas we have passively inherited, recreates them in another form, with another accent, granting them new meanings according to the vital and dynamic needs of the spirit. The conflict not only divides but also unites the combatants; it compels them to correct their errors and, by cultivating the virtues, gives them the power to meet their needs. Abstract right thus musters its own forces and abstract civilization is realized by barbarous means; the small states' demands for existence are justified, not by appeal to abstract justice, which often conceals the compromises between the opposing appetites of the big states, but through hard work, which will show that they are worthy of the well-being they attain along the way.

We have barely seen the beginning of the great national renewals. We have lost too much time to complain, before non-existent tribunals, about the insults and outrages by which our adversaries have debased our inheritance of ideal values. We have just begun to appreciate that this entire heritage needs to be re-founded on action and that there is no other way to attain that prize. Our war will be a war of civilizations, for justice or for

independence, only to the extent that we know how to transform these ideals into immanent and pragmatic values. The same may be said of Latin civilization, about which so much is said today. There is no past for us to conserve, but a future for us to create through active collaboration, which alone will attest to the glorious unity of our Latin race.

The same renewal can be observed in the individual consciousness. I have spoken about a materialistic and economic interpretation of the war, but in saying this I did not mean to consecrate the definitive truth and goodness of historical materialism, along with all the oversimplification inherent to it, whereby it reduces and subjugates the fullness of facts, by making them exponents of economic factors, and schematizes the organic and compact structure of history according to an artificial system of levels and ranks. But the war involves too much violent passion to be fitted to the narrow limits of an economic mechanism, with its artificial differences of rank and its fatal pressures. It represents the awakening of potent feelings, a rapid and violent concentration of hatreds and grudges; but more even than a hotbed of hatred and external disagreements, it is a centre of internal agreement, a flame, a singular passion, unifying the whole population through the disciplines of love, cohesion and sacrifice.

But, as an aside, had the war been the product of purely material and economic causes and conditions, would it thereby be deprived of any value and ideal efficacy? It is said that civilization is a beautiful plant grown in compost; but is everything that is in the plant already in the compost, or does it not exist until it has been transformed and re-evaluated? The difference is between a container and its content. According to historical materialism, the economy contains all values within it, while in reality, by contrast, the economy is contained solely in things, and resides in them, transfigured. And this is no trifling difference.

We can hope, therefore, that the war can be purged of its impure origins and, as it represents a crisis of historical materialism, provide at the same time an immanent and

liberating critique of it. It rises from the mire of individual and national consciousness, in which every flame of ideals, moral dignity, religion and love of country is snuffed out. But can the war not purify its own contents and create new, greater content and new ideals to be incarnated in future generations?

In formulating these hopes, I am not looking far into the future. There is already something that has been taking shape throughout the war, which, though still uncertain, just as the vicissitudes of the war itself are uncertain, might be a prelude to something greater, like achievements of which we hear an echo from afar. It is the deep and sincere ideal of the war, an ideal that cleaves close to the ground, and which resides in the hearts of the humble: the ideal of action.

Let us for a moment set to one side the great ideologies of races and of parties, which try to go beyond the war and to include it in their remote ends. Quite the contrary, those ends are subordinated to the war because it is extrinsic to them. Let us look more closely at the ideals which have emanated directly from the war, and which, though insufficient to express its supreme finality, are nonetheless a living expression of its renewing effect on consciousness.

I mentioned ‘the ideal of action’. This is the philosophy of the humble, of all those who are fighting. Whatever clash of extrinsically derived ends makes nations fight, they act for the sake of acting, in order not to be overwhelmed by the actions of others. The action fills the void of consciousnesses, creates the ideal atmosphere in which to live and exert oneself. That same ideal is the fever of action, which consumes and exhausts our powers and at the same time creates new, boundless powers to replace them. Who, when acting, looks beyond what he is doing? Each person feels that his own action fills his entire being; he is satisfied by it and seeks no justification for what the act entails, since the act justifies and legitimates itself.

Until a time not so long ago, before the war, there were symptoms of transformation, also bogus – a fever that sapped our strength. There was no action, only a desire for it. We recognized the need to act, but were left with a feeling of impotent frustration. It was felt that our efforts, this tension, were in vain; and in vain we turned to the surrogates of military action. One was sport, copies of action invented in times of idleness. What stores of energy were consumed there; how many souls were reaped! And all this left a void in our hearts, a feeling of unreality, a sense that labours were for nothing. There was a desire to apply the moral values of military action to sport, for the sake of imitation: people spoke of greatness, excellence and heroism; the greatest champions were regarded as their nations personified, and there was even talk of patriotism and national dignity being created or taught. But there was something false about the accent; the words did not resonate in the hearts of the people. There was something ignoble about the imitations, something vulgar and counterfeit. In this respect we were, as I have said, energized but unsatisfied, primed but unfulfilled. Action had been reduced to a pastime, something not really serious and therefore worthless. It was a pointless exercise of power, all the more pointless the more strength it revealed and sapped.

Now everything seems to have changed. One feels the seriousness of the action, and with it its nobility and its value. In true action the true virtues arise: greatness, heroism, love of one's country, agreement between men, disinterestedness, a unity of aspiration, the spirit of abnegation and of sacrifice. Action unifies as it divides; and even in its most tragic form, war, its dialectic of contraries is manifest: it brings about a love that is in fact a display of hate, as well as hatreds that are vehicles for love; it gives us the power to destroy, and destroys some forces in order to create still others; it raises the level of discord only to overcome it with concord; it harms interests only to purify them through disinterestedness, abnegation and sacrifice. In it the individual is given great power and the consciousness of an entire race; he recognizes his sacred right to representation, which he had once sought in vain

to exercise in the assemblies; he feels that bond of reciprocity with the state, which had formerly escaped him, eclipsed by the impersonal otherness of the government and the administration. As the individual's contingent egoism is further increased, so is the universality of his being, the purity of his humanity, the unity of his race. Each person contributes his share to the ideal of the war effort. The very diversity of its intellectual potency creates a hierarchy without privilege, because all the forces are equivalent in the shared consciousness of the seriousness and dignity of the task at hand.

There is the humble soldier who fights to keep himself from being overwhelmed, not only by his adversaries, but by his comrades. There is he who understands his actions to be bound by the rules of a greater action: his duty to his superiors, to his motherland, or to himself. There is he who sees at work in the action the principle of the supreme economy of the universe: the struggle against inertia, the great parasite of a world where the only thing that has value is work, action. And finally there is the person who transfers this same principle of his own individual action to that of his entire people, who understands his goal to be an act of conservation and of safeguarding his own existence, who takes comfort in feeling in his heart the consensus of the totality and is driven by the power of that consensus. But every one of these people, from the humblest soldier to the most profound expert on the realities of things, sees in the formula of acting for the sake of acting an adequate expression of his own being, and in every one the divine fever of action is communicated and shared – that fever which the ancients knew, calling it by a name that counts for rather more today: enthusiasm.

In our country, when no one was acting, but people wanted to act, there was no other justification but the necessity of acting. I am talking about true, intrinsic, active justification, not those justifications that are reported in the historical ideologies of the past, which represent only some of the secondary ramifications of the central and intense current of the

present action. One wants to act so as not to be overwhelmed by the actions of others: this is as true for races as it is for persons. When everywhere there is action, immobility does not conserve one's being, but diminishes it.

A national patrimony, which is the product of the centuries of actions that preceded it, cannot be conserved except through new actions, which is to say, it is conserved only by growing. In the historical dynamic, stasis is inconceivable: in a world where everything is in movement, he who does not move is really moving backwards. And this counts, naturally, not just for the conservation of territories, but for the conservation of all the historic national values, which have their corporeal expression in territories. Nor is this something to be observed sporadically and occasionally, but rather the chief law of thought. No values can be conserved except through the production of new values, and no action can be consolidated except through further action.

4. Political Realism and Idealism

There is a whole category of persons who do not believe in the dynamic efficacy of ideas. They maintain that, just as conflicts between peoples play out on strictly political grounds, the means they use to come to grips with those conflicts also have a uniquely political character. These advocates of the substantial autonomy of politics are always more or less infected by empirical realism, which reduces the consciousness of nations to the mere personalities of individual governments. They are thus inclined to overvalue diplomatic relations, ingenuity and ministers' 'ploys', thereby degrading the historic character of political action to that of a merely contingent *affair*.

While we remained neutral, those with this wretched political mentality were able to give free vent to its sophistications, arguing over our rulers' obscure machinations with the warring powers, and attributing to the government, with open satisfaction, intentions and

Machiavellian schemes that existed only in their minds. Acting in this way, they unknowingly discredit Italy abroad, making it look mercenary, in a way that suggested an unenviable spiritual kinship with the politics of the Italian principalities of the Renaissance.

The publication of diplomatic documents and declarations, full of clarity and righteousness, which Salandra, President of the Council of Ministers, has issued in Campidoglio, served to shine light on these false shadows, revealing a healthy moral unity of means and ends, of political art and historical consciousness, which our spirit so sorely needed. In accepting our part in the war, we are keenly conscious of our past neutrality as a solely moral crisis, now morally resolved. The political means used to arrive at this solution no longer appeared to us as vulgar bargaining, about which some people felt hopeful and others fearful, but as an instrument necessary for the concrete realization of a higher end, which imbued politics with a new meaning and value. To Salandra we attribute the immense merit of having served, during the ten months of our neutrality, as a moral force in the present war, doing as much as or even more than a military force.

This aside, it may be observed, not only in the attitude of Italy but in the attitudes of all the European powers, that a purely political assessment of whether to participate in the war, set apart from the profound national and historical consciousness, no longer has any value today. Every European power, in spite of all the diplomatic efforts at securing artificial and bogus relationships, chose the simplest and most elementary line of conduct, in which the clearest, tidiest political reason comes into contact with the purest and most spontaneous popular sentiments – sentiments that, in their time, were the fruit of an entire history, alive in the hearts and minds of the people.

But these reckless, sham supporters of neutrality have not abandoned the pretence of having a profound political understanding of the situation. Even now that they have come face to face with the war, they continue, with ever more pernicious results, to come up with

clever excuses for not declaring war on Germany, in which they see signs of a still more refined Machiavellianism. I should like to think that foreign public opinion will not be influenced by these observations, which we see as repugnant to any healthy moral judgement. We do not yet have all the evidence we need to disprove this vulgar calumny, but we have a sound *a priori* criterion to expose the lying spirit behind it. It consists in the fact that a government which from the outset wanted to give our war a boldly moral, nobly Italian inspiration cannot be capable of actions inconsistent with strict loyalty and complete sincerity toward the Allies.

Another theory, apart from these misguided aberrations, though conceived in the same spirit, has, or at least had, a measure of success in Italy. This is political realism, or '*Realpolitik*', which, though it originated long ago in Italy, has long since taken root in Germany, whence it returns to us with a certain veneer of modernity. This theory has not undergone too many radical modifications and it is not too far from the original form in which Machiavelli and Guicciardini, our greatest political historians of the Renaissance, conceived of it (albeit each in his own way). The brilliant French memorialists of the following era broke it down into a thousand maxims and aphorisms, but with the same accent of malicious cruelty and ingenuity: the author of *Anti-Machiavel*, Frederick the Great, offers us in his volumes of memoirs an inestimable wealth of refined Machiavellianism, either in his political theory or in the endless complexity of his actions, inspired by precisely these principles.

In the experience of the Germans of today, the old maxims are revived in a more leaden, less spontaneous form. Politics is a matter of reason and calculation, not of sentiment; hence the hand of the Pope on the one side, the Turk on the other; the interests of the state count for more than anything and against everything: so treaties have no more value than the paper they are written on; in politics, legitimate actions are those that, were they carried out

by a private individual, would diminish the moral personality; in war, there are no limits to the action other than utility, and no humanitarian limits whatsoever; hence the bombardment of undefended cities, the sinking of merchant navies, and so on. One of our writers, wondering at the general repugnance that *Realpolitik* inspires, has sought to popularize the concept in these parts, giving the adjective 'real' the value of an immanent and concrete need that one would have to attribute to the substantive noun itself. *Realpolitik* would be the true politics, founded on facts and not on imagination or sentiment; in the same way, one could accept the idea of a *Realgeographie* or a *Realphilosophie*, likewise opposed to fantastical constructions with no real basis. This author wants to treat us, in effect, as though we were a little too naive; and in setting himself at the level of our supposed naiveté, he in turn has fallen into the same trap.

I think that behind the immediate feeling of repugnance for the manifestations of German *Realpolitik* is a comprehension of the historical value of the concept, much more exact than any explanation limited by its purely etymological significance, which fails to capture the historical and concrete content of the term. In *Realpolitik* there is in effect a complex of historical experience of the past, erected into a system and imagined to have permanent, unconditional value. The realist demand, in politics as in every other manifestation of life, is born out of humanism, in antithesis to the transcendent and divine conception of the medieval state. In the commons and the principalities of the Renaissance we find the first naive manifestations of a humanity aware of possessing the state within itself (and of no longer being possessed by it) and of realizing it by its own means, according to its own will and thus by its own free choice. From here originates politics as an entirely human and autonomous art, entrusted with the ability, ingenuity and intelligence of individuals, to the level of which states are reduced. No universal history, past, principle or concept would

any longer confine and direct the action of these politics: truly new men mean to realize only their own ends, and use states as means to extend and supplement their own powers.

But the politics of the next epoch already has a past to conserve, a dynastic tradition to continue. The personality of the state is dilated without any change to its nature; it is incarnate in the sovereign, who constitutes its living tradition, the centre of its political relations and of manifestations, with politics regarded always as an autonomous art. The people, then, are inert and malleable matter, their form impressed on them from without; the consciousness of the State is imposed on them as a true and independent law.[10] Realist politics itself responds to the historical mentality of this epoch and expresses itself accordingly: the state loses the unitary consciousness of all the forces that stir within it, and above all that moral personality, which alone could make apparent the immorality of a politics for which the utilitarian calculus, even in its most criminal form, is a rule and an end in itself.

The French Revolution came to shake up the great human collectives; classical German thought created the ethical conception of the state as the personification of the spirit, in its fullness and in its concrete character. In the history of modern states we see moral demands increasingly embodied, and the consciousness of individuals increasingly founded on the immanent individuality of states. Above the purely interested motives of realism, the immorality at the base of which has already been revealed, is its supreme interest: the moral dignity, honour and loyalty of this greatest of individuals, the state. Treaties are no longer just pieces of paper; their ratification imposes obligations on the whole personality of the signatory and cannot be made in vain by any pretended higher interest without infringing the very highest interests of the personality. Alliances are not unions against nature, calculated and then brutally imposed on the consciousness of peoples, but are rather guided and

[10] [Translator's note: I follow de Ruggiero in capitalizing the first letter of 'State' in this sentence, but not elsewhere.]

sustained by reasoned and at the same time sentimental consensus of the popular consciousness, which takes its place inside and united with the consciousness of the state. And the war must admit other limits besides those of immediate utility; a limit, we may say without embarrassment, of humanity, demanded, so to speak, by this higher utility, which sees beyond the war and regards it not as a painful crisis, but as a fleeting one.

In the *Realpolitik* of the Germans today we see the brutal disavowal of the German thought of the classical era, a regression toward stages of history already surpassed. It is certain that in history there is never a true regress: I am not talking about a pure and simple return to the political experiences of the Electors of Brandenburg or of the first Kings of Prussia. I am talking instead about an intellectual decadence like that which has appeared time and again these past fifty years in all the manifestations of German thought. So as Marxist theory clings to the trunk of classical philosophy, it shrinks and vulgarizes it in a false and mechanical conception of values; or as positivism and neo-Kantianism clip the wings of a genial body of thought which they pretend to continue; or as a vast and cumbersome culture is substituted for the free movement of an aristocratic intelligence; and as the spiritual supremacy dreamed of by the old Germany degenerates into boundless economic greed, so too does *Realpolitik* take possession of the immense historical and ideal power of the German state, the true miracle of the nineteenth century, in order to prostitute it before the world and before history.

In other respects, though, there is no absolute decadence. Like Marxism, positivism and neo-Kantianism, and although it seems decadent compared to the original heights of the classical German mentality, *Realpolitik* has a profound, latent immanent need, a need that previous speculations never satisfied; so, in the dissolution of one form of life, it sows the seeds of a new life from which grow the nascent speculations of contemporary idealists. Its brutality and its implacable toughness notwithstanding, *Realpolitik* contains concrete and

vital needs that are imposed on idealism in the present and will go on being imposed in the future. Nothing that is done in history can be lost to history. The old and abstract idealism of our democracies will be renewed through its confrontations with the realism that is its antithesis; and the realism of its adversaries will be renewed, too, through its interpenetration with that profound idealist spirit of which it is deprived. In every sphere of human activity, the needs of modern history are to be found in precisely this synthesis. Politics, so far as it is an autonomous and free-standing art, has already had its time, and has not been able to live except to the extent that, in its time, it was the historical consciousness of an era. Machiavelli is the political consciousness of the Renaissance, inasmuch as he was truly its historical consciousness; and it would be in vain to reprove him for failing to recognize the demands of a science which was constituted only later. In his era, his art was even better than that science.

What we now need, on the contrary, is to resolve the art of politics into the science of politics, politics into history, interests into the total personality of the state, and immediate reality into the ideal reality of the spirit. Ability, ingenuity, *savoir-faire*, all the means with which the immediate practice of the art of politics is realized – these have no permanent value except insofar as they serve to express the historical character of the consciousness of the people, and to the extent that, in the contingencies of action derived from that consciousness, the whole of their past and future, which constitute the immanent eternity of the act, is committed. To preserve the internal unity of the State and to legitimize its outward actions, interest is insufficient; there is a higher, more solid moral unity where interest itself stands transfigured and ennobled. From this point of view the formula ‘sacred egoism of a nation’ does not express anything but an incomplete spiritual reality, the last push by empirical realism to attain the ideal of moral consciousness that has always escaped it, just as the frank

simplicity of the moral universalism of a Kant escapes the humanitarian refinements of the egoistic morals of a Mill.

5. The Doctrinal Antitheses

The opposition between the political doctrines was only a moment of a more profound opposition between us: that of two forms of neutrality which, at the moment when we found ourselves faced with the historic choice, were set at opposite poles according to their own tendencies.

On the one hand, the Germanophile movement was the work of a small aristocracy, somewhat closed in on itself, like a caste, formed in large part by professors who modelled their mentality on that of the Germans. On the other hand, more disparate temperaments were drawn to the opposing anti-German movement, including democrats and aristocrats from circles even smaller than the one just mentioned. These, too, drew on German thought, but after a certain point had begun to emancipate themselves from it. The latter aristocracy, so far as it no longer supposed its power to reside in a past that had to be conserved, but in a future which had to be created, was to a greater extent free from caste prejudices and intellectualistic, doctrinaire postulates. The clash between the two tendencies was lively and fruitful; each of the two parties came to conceive of itself more clearly and more fully differentiated and at the same time took from the other the great exigencies that it expressed. Supporters of the Germans have made good sport of a great many of their adversaries: to their incoherent and often superficial tendencies they were able to oppose without much effort the solid structure of German culture, fruit of serious labour and tenacious discipline, things little familiar to our mass democracies.

On the other hand, though, these last-mentioned supporters of Germany, despite their scant knowledge of German culture *in concreto*, had an intuition, if not much understanding,

of its weaknesses; and in their ingenuous desire to fight one symbol with another, they sought an antithetical term, bringing Italian civilization, the Latin spirit and even *cultura* to bear against *Kultur*! At the bottom of these attempts was a preoccupation with giving our culture an autonomous and original accent and intonation, compared with the adversaries' attempts to impose on us, against all the exigencies of spiritual life, an extraneous and impersonal system of ideas, discipline and labour, which, in the form set out by the Germans, was repugnant to our intellectual temperament.

Culture, then, cannot be fought using a coextensive concept, still less with a precise and definite one; as the false and mechanical democratization of knowledge, it can be dissolved and beaten only in the spirit of an aristocracy. For this reason it will not be out of place for me to give a brief and general outline of a critique of the concept of culture from the idealist point of view.

In culture we find the idea of knowledge without real depth, which grows in extension and not in mental profundity, which is not *in fieri*, like a process of creation that proceeds from itself, but which is always readymade, the result of slow mental sedimentation, at once the object and the material of thought and as such capable only of grasping superficial manifestations. Lacking, as positivism does, the capacity to collaborate seriously with the various particular sciences, it entertained fantasies about the gaps between one science and the other, and created among the various sciences not connective but fatty tissue, which was one of the great sticking points in the free movement of the various sciences, as there was in the concept of culture the idea of labour extrinsic to the act of creative mentality, concerned exclusively with the coordination of facts and mental givens.

The concept of culture, as the expression of a philosophical attitude, arises in Germany from positivism, in a supposed speculative renaissance which has taken various names: neo-Kantianism, philosophy of value and philosophy of culture (Rickert and his

school). The idea of a mechanical aggregate of parts, not closely connected, but drawn together from external sources far removed from their living origin in thought – this idea, latent in the concept of culture, is wholly proper to positivism. In neither is there a concept of a living spirit, of something growing out of itself, of development from within, but the concept of culture as the exteriority of the real in itself, and thus as mechanism. It does not matter that there is a great difference between the brutal physical mechanism of the positivists and the ideal mechanism of culture, in the sense of progressive refinement and estrangement from the material world. The difference does not annul the unity, which consists in a naturalistic premise shared by both doctrines.

Just as it reveals the decadence of the contemporary German mentality, this intellectual attitude explains the coercive and violent form with which it pretends to defend its culture or, even better, to impose it on the world. Socrates, in the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon, says that one who wants to do violence needs not a few comrades, but one who wants to persuade needs none at all: in fact, all one needs is the ability to persuade.[11] Now, the structure of German culture expresses this notion of doing violence, of creating adhesion without consensus, of imposing readymade, crystallized beliefs on a spirit that does not ask for them or which manifests all its autonomous and original interests in other ways.

But for all that we might criticize this tendency of culture to direct its actions at things outside itself, can we not discern in it the beginning of a spiritual renewal, and regard it, as such, as an object worthy of study, a mission for the learned? Some say that even if no new thought is expressed in a culture, at least it prepares the ground for new ideas, new intellectual currents; thus it has the value of a connecting passageway, a link in a chain. But this is untenable. Living thought is universal; culture is nothing but a pure generality of

[11] [Translator's note: Xenophon, *Memorabilia,* trans. Amy L. Bonnette (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 7, chapter 2, §11: 'one who dares to use violence would need no few allies, but one who is able to persuade needs no one. For even when alone he would believe himself able to persuade'.]

knowledge. The first is a living body; the other is a cadaver. And as the living body comes before the cadaver, the universal is prior to the general. This implies that culture is not the soil in which new thought germinates, but is by nature inert, incapable of cultivating life. On the contrary, it presupposes life, which is, as it were, the crystallization of it. Each new movement of thought, manifest in original and profound creative acts, irretrievably has, therefore, a culture, an ideal naturalism, from which all that was manifest in it as an internalized and potent effort vanishes, and remains only in the form of its product, something wholly superficial, which, as it is passed from one mind to another, becomes part of the common heritage. So the enlightened age of the Greek sophists, including Protagoras and Gorgias, follows the great humanistic current of Greek thought; thus the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century follows the era of great scientific discoveries; and thus, last of all, the culture of today is like a parasite on German Romantic thought.

Culture follows what we may call spiritual activity, and may be defined as a form of 'despiritualized' knowledge.[12] It cannot be considered a point or region of union between two acts of the spirit: no spark is struck between non-combustible materials and, in the development of the universal, there is no place for the general. Spiritual activity communicates directly and immediately with spiritual activity; a thought cannot be developed after it has been externalized and 'desubjectivized'. Profound solutions are those which illuminate the intimacy and subjectivity of problems. Now such subjectivity is precisely what is missing from this view of culture, in which we find nothing but results and dead solutions; and the more easily they come to us, the more inert they are. To the brutal and mechanical objectivity of culture we have therefore the right to oppose our free and spontaneous

[12] [Translator's note: there are terminological differences between the French and Italian versions of this paragraph. In the French text, de Ruggiero refers to activité spirituelle (spiritual activity) where in the Italian he refers to mentalità (mentality), and to savoir «*déspiritualisé*» ('despiritualized' knowledge) in French rather than «*sapere smentalizzato*» (dementalized knowledge) in Italian. For the sake of consistency with the conventions of Italian idealist terminology, I have favoured the French 'spiritual' rather than the Italian 'mental' format in my translation.]

subjectivity, with its proper and basic needs, and with its original ends. Spiritual and mental reality is not a mosaic that can be put together from separate fragments of knowledge picked up elsewhere. It is rather a tension, an effort, a labour that cannot be completed except through the absolute autonomy of the subject. We have drawn, and we will continue to draw, upon the free spiritual activity of Germany, according to the needs of our spirit; but this is why we must repudiate the tendency of German culture to 'depersonalize' our labour, to block its distinctive accent and intonation out of our studies. In this effort to emancipate ourselves, which converges and must converge with all the other efforts of the various national activities, we recognize that we Italians have much to learn from the French, particularly from contemporary French philosophy, that organ of autonomous life which flows from the intimate and original needs of French thought; but we can proudly affirm that in Italy, too, there are indubitable signs of a similar renewal.

To conclude this too-rapid and cursory examination, we can formulate, in place of the bogus antitheses between culture and civilization, '*Kultur*' and *cultura*, which are developing on the same mental plane and fighting with the same armies, the true and more profound antithesis of culture and spiritual activity; of knowledge that is objective and fixed from the outside and knowledge that is dynamic and active, residing in the intimacy of the spirit; and of a pure, impersonal science, which is the sedimentation of dead results, and a scientific consciousness, a living process onto which the traits of the spiritual physiognomy of each people are impressed.

These criticisms of the concept of culture are not directed, of course, at the quite right and legitimate fact that each culture diffuses its own ideas. Rather, they are directed at a mental form, a habit, which may be observed principally in the German works of our time, characterized by action, directed toward the outside, which becomes an end in itself. At the same time, these criticisms are not intended to kill one culture with another, but rather to

overcome what they are fighting about. This aim cannot be realized anywhere but within the compass of a strict spiritual aristocracy with the capacity to resolve the ideal moment of culture into itself, thereby realizing a more profound universality. Such aristocracies express the mental physiognomy of an entire people.[13]

6. The Historical Antitheses

This need for autonomy in intellectual works is not some isolated thing. On the contrary, it is the expression of the aspiration, implicit in every kind of activity, to proper and autonomous life. Autonomy and liberty are the words most profoundly impressed upon our spirit. Our war rightly began with a free act, an autonomous decision, an initiative. We were not, like all the other nations, caught up in the fatal current of August 1914. We had the time to look upon the war and all its horrors as it was being fought by other people; and then we wanted the war for ourselves. The Allies will have to recognise the value of this initiative, of which we are rightly proud.

But is there nothing arbitrary about the war? Is there, in our act of liberation, any pretence at the recommencement of a new history for us? That is how it appears to some people: to them it seemed that to declare war on Austria was to abandon a policy that had stood for thirty years, and that we lost all the fruits of an alliance for which we had paid, without a doubt, a bitter price, but in the shadow of which that dark state had developed and won its place among the states of Europe. To them it seemed, therefore, that we entered the war without appreciating the full import of our past history, and this weighed on our

[13] [De Ruggiero's footnote, French version only:] I refer, if I may, to my little book, *Critique du Concept de Culture* (Catania: Batiato, 1914), in which are reprinted some of my articles published in the *Voce* of Florence in 1912 and 1913.

conscience as a sin to be expiated. Our new political life was sullied with the stain of arrivism.

In reality, every act, whether of individuals or of nations, is an expiation, but at the same time a redemption. Our national life atones for its original sin in the torments of the war, the lack of cohesion, the lack of a unitary consciousness that stifled our wars of independence; it also atones for the ease with which results were obtained for a small price, in its invincible inertia. But this atonement did not take place in May 1915, but long before, through the pain and humiliation that negated the ideal premises of our *Risorgimento* and contradicted the feelings of the people. The war, as our leaders plainly saw, represents the last act of this policy, its final and decisive crisis: under its negative and formal aspect, it has its origins in the very treaty that once allied us with our present enemies.

But the war has a positive aspect, which is much more important. Our attitude today, having overcome the attenuations of Italian historical life which our politics implies, reunites all the ideal content of the national consciousness, repairs the old tensions between our history and our politics, our idealism and our realism. It is a continuation, then, and at the same time an antithesis: this is our attitude with respect to our historic past, but all the profound innovation of life resumes in precisely these two principles. The accusation of arrivism resulted from an incomplete appreciation of the continuity of our history, in the presence of its antithetical character. But we feel that we have nothing to deny in our past; likewise the alliance of yesterday is for us a moment of our new life today, since the very course of the war we are fighting accents and underlines the phases of this alliance, treating the problems it poses and amending its shortcomings.

A higher alliance is constituted by nations at war. The old alliance with Germany could not satisfy a nation like ours, born in a history of wars for freedom. Germany, thanks to its character, its power and its recent history, saw us not as allies but as vassals. For us its

preponderant power was not to stimulate other powers, but to corrupt them; its ventures overpowered ours, which were comparatively feeble; it insinuates its way of life into ours, corrupting it. Only today is its power truly a source of power for us, and the necessities of the conflict bring ours slowly to the level of theirs. A year of war created a spiritual *rapprochement* far more intimate and fecund than thirty years of alliance did. The Germans' earlier efforts to penetrate our mentality, as they had elsewhere, gradually effaced the traits of our physiognomy, leaving us unable to appreciate the burden these efforts imposed on us or to take the initiative for ourselves. Today, by contrast, with the conflict raging, their influence is revealed to us, but at the same time the war reveals us to ourselves, and we can assimilate into the autonomy of our spirit the very content which has until now been offered to us as a slow poison. What was once a sign of inferiority and subjection has truly begun to become a force for emancipation and elevation.

The benefit is undoubtedly reciprocal. Just as it corrupted us, Germany corrupted itself: the ease with which its influence spread abroad, the lack of obstacles and opposition to it, diminished its self-consciousness, which constitutes the personality and subjectivity of the whole effort. Already in German art, science, culture and economics, there were unmistakable signs that Germany had become depersonalized and unfocused. For Italians, then, the war has the value of having revealed Germany's distinctions, which it would otherwise have surrendered as it overexerted itself. For other reasons, the same advantages are realized by other peoples. Today this autonomy, which at first constituted nothing but an abstract and transcendent ideal, is being painfully realized in each one of them. In this higher collaboration with its adversary, each rediscovers the power of its personal accent and absorbs the lives of others, incorporating them into its own. And this is the ultimate significance of the conflict: the war should not have the absurd outcome of nullifying the important contribution of the German people to history, but that of appropriating it without

nullifying it, or rather of growing and developing it by possessing it and not by allowing it to possess us.

We Italians feel the full and vital value of this autonomy. A young people, a recent arrival in the history of the great nations, we see in it the need not to conserve a heritage, but to secure our labours for ourselves. Until today the situation of the different peoples was determined by their past, by their history; and we have fatally endured, for reasons that were not our fault, a diminution of our being, which is not deeply rooted in the past. Today the war redeems us of the passivity of our nature, re-establishing in action the past common to all people and effectuating a new attribution of values commensurate with the intensity of the power of each. In this consists the renewed consciousness of action which, contrary to any arrivism, is rather the greatest instance of history, of this immanent and dynamic history that radiates from today and instils the intensity of present life in the work of a fecund re-evaluation of the past. And through this effort a future is in the course of unfolding before us.

Translated by J. R. M. Wakefield