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H. L. MENCKEN

“The Diary of a Retreat”

In 1916 the German offensive at Verdun failed to break the French army, while the Anglo-French offensive on the Somme forced the Germans to fight a debilitating defensive battle against an enemy with growing material superiority. Severe food shortages increased unrest on the home front in Germany and Austria-Hungary. Faced with the prospect of losing a prolonged war of attrition, the German military leadership launched a new U-boat campaign aimed at British imports of food and raw materials. Although the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare risked drawing the United States into the war, Germany believed it could defeat Great Britain before America could effectively intervene. Despite the opposition of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, who believed America’s entry into the conflict would seal Germany’s fate, the Kaiser endorsed the new policy on January 9, 1917. Henry Louis Mencken, former editor of the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, co-editor of *The Smart Set*, and America’s premier social critic, arrived in Berlin in late January to report on the war for the *Sun*. The grandson of German immigrants, Mencken had already sparked controversy in the United States with his pro-German sympathies. He now found himself in Berlin at a turning point in American-German relations.

BERLIN, Feb. 1.

ACROSS the front page of the *Tageblatt* this morning ran the long-awaited, hat-in-the-ring-throwing, much-pother-through-out-the-world-up-stirring headline: *Verkündung des uneingeschränkten U-Boot-Krieges!*—Proclamation of the Unrestrained U-Boat War! At last, by dam! The adjective used to be *rücksichtslos*, which is to say, reckless. Lately it has been *verschärften*: sharpened. Now it is *uneingeschränkten*: unrestrained, unlimited, fast and loose, knock him down and drag him out, without benefit of clergy. But whatever the term used to designate it, the thing in itself remains, and out of that thing in itself, unless I lose my guess, a lot of trouble is going to arise. If the United States accepts this new slaughter of ships without giving Dr. Bernstorff his walking papers, it will be a miracle. If it goes another month without horning into the war, it will be two miracles . . .

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I got back to Berlin from Vilna late last night, tired, rheumatic and half-frozen, and rolled into bed at once. This morning I turned out just in time for the fireworks. The first man I encountered was Raymond Swing, of the Chicago *Daily News*. I had borrowed a heavy overcoat and a pair of leather *Gamaschen* from him, and went to his office in Unter den Linden to thank him for them, and to give him a *Leberwurst*—a souvenir of the army slaughter house at Novo Aleksandrowsk. "Pack your bags!" said Swing. "The jig is up. We'll be kicked out in five days." "But no, my dear Mon Chair! Surely"——"But yes, my dear Herr Kollege! This is the finish. *Exeunt omnes!*" . . . Swing's chief, Oswald Schütte, came in. A far more optimistic fellow. Schütte believes that the United States will keep hands off—that the new rough-house will promote peace. The other American correspondents, he says, are about evenly divided. As for me!——

I have spoken of fireworks. Let me be exact: I have seen none on the German side. The calm of the Germans is amazing, almost staggering. They know very well that they are challenging the United States to join their enemies, and not only the United States, but also Denmark, Holland, Norway and even Switzerland, and yet they show no anxiety whatever, and scarcely any interest. Outside the *Lokal-Anzeiger* office, in Unter den Linden, the crowd about the bulletin board has never got beyond 15 or 20 persons all day. Not a single newspaper has printed an extra. No unusual display of the news is visible. The *Lokal-Anzeiger* publishes a brief statement by Admiral von Scheer in a box on its front page—and that is all. The other papers content themselves with the pronouncement of Von Hindenburg, in small type and on inside pages.

Our front is secure on all sides. We have the necessary reserves everywhere. The morale of our troops is sound and unshaken. The general military situation is such that we can accept safely all consequences of an unrestrained U-boat war. And inasmuch as this U-boat war offers us the means of doing the maximum of damage to our foes we must begin it forthwith.

It would be impossible to overestimate the effect of this statement. It is almost alone responsible, I dare say, for the calm which hangs over Berlin—and for the unmistakable

jauntiness under the calm. Hindenburg is not only the hero and idol of the Germans; he has become their prophet and oracle, and his rare and austere utterances are accepted as inspired and impeccable. If he proposed an invasion of England in motorboats, I doubt that a single *Feldgrau* would hang back; or even harbor a qualm. He is credited with astounding prodigies—and many of them he has actually performed. . . . More, he is a very careful fellow. Three or four times today I picked up the rumor that Falkenhayn, with three army corps from Roumania, is already on the Danish frontier. Two weeks ago, coming down from Copenhagen, I saw the Danes digging trenches feverishly—and all the way from the German border back to the very gates of their capital.

* * *

At noon I went to the Military Bureau of the Foreign Office and called on Rittmeister (*i.e.*, Cavalry Captain) Freiherr von Plettenberg. Plettenberg is the Father Superior of the American correspondents. He speaks American (not English, but American) perfectly, and knows the United States very well, for in his early days he worked for the North German Lloyd on the Hoboken docks and later he rose to be a director of the company. Now he looks after newspaper men who want to go to the front, and is in charge of the map room in which the doings of the army are explained to them, and keeps a jug of Scotch whisky for their refreshment. I found him in conference with another old North German Lloyd official, Hauptmann (that is, Captain) von Vignau. The two hailed me hospitably and got out the jug.

“Well,” said the Rittmeister, “what is it going to be?”

I ventured the guess that the finish was in sight.

The Rittmeister looked thoughtful.

“I hope not,” he said, “but maybe you are right. In any case, it’s too late to turn back. England has escaped too long. We must give her a taste of steel.”

“But if the United States enters the war?”

The Rittmeister lighted a cigarette.

“We have considered that, of course,” he replied. “We have had to consider it for two years past. It’s a pity. But it’s now

too late to go back. . . . Meanwhile, let us be hopeful. Maybe the United States will see our point of view, after all. We have no desire to hurt Americans. All we ask is that they keep out of the way while we tackle England. They have done as much for the English. Perhaps they'll do as much for us."

"And if not?"

The Rittmeister achieved a shrug.

"Who can say?" he replied. "All I know is that we are ready to fight as long as it is necessary."

The Hauptmann then spoke up.

"You have seen the German Army in the field," he said. "Did you find any sign that it was *Kriegsmüde* (war-weary)?"

Half an hour's conversation followed, always circling back to the same arguments. Plettenberg and Vignau profess to be optimistic, but it is obvious that both of them expect Bernstorff to be given his passports, and that a declaration of war by the United States would not surprise them. I have met other officers today, and find them all talking the same way. It is difficult to define their mood precisely. I expected a certain amount of anxiety, for they all realize that they are at the parting of the ways, but failed to discover it. They cultivate stoicism, serenity, a dispassionate manner. The air is full of electricity, but there are no sparks.

* * *

At the Foreign Office in the Wilhelmstrasse I found Dr. Roediger at his interminable labors. Dr. Roediger is to the American correspondents in civil matters what the gentlemen of the Military Bureau are to them in military matters. He is the man one sees if one desires to investigate the potato situation, or to look into diplomatic papers, or to arrange for credit with the wireless authorities, or to get advice and consolation. An Oxford man and smooth-shaven, he looks the Englishman far more than the German, and speaks English perfectly. He inhabits a bare room near the entrance of the Wilhelmstrasse barn, and Americans hammer on his door all day.

"We haven't a word," he said. "Our note has been delivered, but that's all we know."

“And what do you expect?”

“Expect? We don’t expect. We merely wait.”

* * *

Up stairs I found Consul-General Thiel, one of the few men in the Wilhelmstrasse who actually know anything about the United States, and the American point of view, and American ways of thinking. Significantly enough, I found him packing his traps; he is ordered to some new field of labor. Is his job here done? Have they given up trying to win their case in America? . . . The Consul-General himself was somewhat vague about it, but he was willing enough to discuss the general situation, and he gave me the clearest statement of the German position that I have yet got hold of.

“This new submarine war,” he said, “is the only way to an early peace. Germany’s peace proposal was perfectly sincere. If the Allies had asked for our terms they would have been surprised by their moderation. Instead, they offered us not only a flat refusal, but also an insult so gross that no self-respecting people could be expected to bear it. We now accept the situation. It is, as they say, a fight to a finish—and we fully expect to be on our legs at that finish.

“Personally, I am very sorry that the United States seems likely to join our enemies, but I see no way to avoid it. The United States, in point of fact, has been on the side of our enemies for a long while, and it has already done us more damage than most of them. To me, at least, this seems quite natural. The sympathies of nations go with their interests, and England’s control of the seas makes American interests identical with her own. The only thing we can do is to make that control of the seas as precarious and hollow as possible, and this we propose to do. So long as England is uninjured by the war, she will keep it going, for it is to her interest to have every other nation damaged as much as possible, including her allies. The one way out is to bring the war home to her—to make her suffer as she is trying to make us suffer. This is what we intend to do.”

“But suppose the United States goes to her aid?”

“I am still in hope,” replied the Consul-General, “that the United States won’t. We have no quarrel with the American people, and do not want to injure them. We offer them a safe conduct

for neutral and necessary business. All we ask of them is that they cease to give active aid to our chief enemy. There is a chance that they may yet see our point of view, and so keep out of what is not their fight, but England's fight. However, if they do not, we shall have to face the fact. It will take the United States six months to make ready for an effective blow. During those six months we will accomplish our plans against England."

"And what then? You will simply have the United States to fight, and the United States can raise and equip five million men."

"True," replied the Consul-General. "But how will the United States get them to Europe?"

* * *

So much for Consul-General Thiel. I sat with him an hour, bombarding him with objections, problems and dilemmas. To every one he offered a pat answer. Obviously, the whole thing has been thought out to nine or ten places of decimals. I have talked to half a dozen. Thiel is by far the cleverest of them. They all say the same things; it is like a lesson learned. The one novelty I encountered I dredged out of an officer—more, a marine officer.

"The trouble with this new U-boat campaign," he said, "is that it promises too much. The German people probably expect a clean-up of the English merchant fleet in six months. They will be disappointed. Say 40 ships come out of a given harbor in a day. We'll be lucky if we sink one. Starving England will be a hard job—maybe, like starving Germany, a quite impossible job."

* * *

No such doubts, however, are on tap in the newspapers. There the tune is one of extreme optimism, even of complacency. Prussian discipline is showing itself; even those who were against the "sharpened" U-boat war a week ago are now in favor of it and preaching it. Among them, for example, is Herr Gutmann, head of the great Dresdner Bank. He used to be a leader of the anti-U-boatistas; today he told one of the American correspondents that he is hot for the slaughter.

In yesterday's papers was a statement by the official Wolff Telegraph Bureau, obviously designed to prepare the way for

this morning's announcement. It showed the doings of the U-boats in 1916. During December, it appears, they disposed of 217 ships, of a total tonnage of 415,500. Of these ships, 152 flew enemy flags and 65 were neutrals carrying contraband. The English loss was 240,000 tons. All this in December alone. In November the bag was 408,500 tons. But I had better copy the figures for the whole year from yesterday's *Lokal-Anzeiger*:

	Tons.
January–February	238,000
March–April	432,000
May–June	219,000
July–August	273,779
September	254,600
October	393,500
November	408,500
December	<u>415,500</u>
Total	2,634,879

The “sharpened” U-boat war, so it is gossiped, is estimated to dispose of 1,000,000 tons a month. A large bite, indeed. What of the chewing thereof?

* * *

The cold here is intense. It is positively painful to walk down Unter den Linden. Soldiers, schoolboys, old men, women and even girls are digging away at the frozen snow. In some of the Berlin boroughs the authorities are calling for volunteers. . . . As for me, I am pretty well banged up. The cold came very near fetching me in Lithuania, and now I have a game foot and my nose shows signs of frostbite. What if my beauty is ruined forever?

* * *

Gerard seems very pessimistic. The other correspondents say that he is always pessimistic—that he has been preaching disaster for a year past. But this time, I fancy, he has good excuse for his mood.

The Baltimore Sun, March 10, 1917